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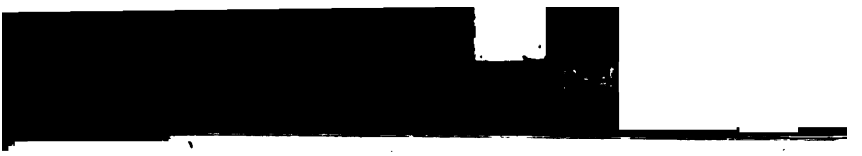


C. Liebig
das Weibendorf













A MIXED MARRIAGE





A MIXED MARRIAGE

BY

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A MIXED MARRIAGE

CHAPTER I

THE PRINCE

"There be three things which are too wonderful for me,
Yea, four which I know not:
The way of an eagle in the air,
The way of a serpent upon a rock,
The way of a ship in the midst of the sea,
And the way of a man with a maid."—SOLOMON.

WINSTON HALL looked peaceful and quiet in the afternoon light of the summer sun. It stood on the sloping high-ground which forms the beautiful valley of the Waveney. Before it was embowered in the fine old elms which are now its pride, it might have served as a landmark to wanderers coming up the highway of the river from Broadland. A carriage-drive led in a large encircling sweep past some handsome ilex-trees to the porch of the white brick Elizabethan house.

Appearances, however, were deceptive, and the external calm was not to be found within, where all was bustle and excitement. A guest was expected, and Mrs Carlyon, the squire's wife, was in a quiver of pride and nervousness. Her tiny hands, sparkling with diamonds, shook as they touched the roses, azaleas, and maidenhair fern that adorned the drawing-room. A prince, a real live prince, was coming to stay at the Hall. He might arrive at any moment. Her curiosity was also raised, for she had never seen him. He was a foreigner, a nobleman from Hyderabad. He was not

a reigning prince, nor heir to any throne; but he was of noble birth, and as proud of his descent as the Nizam himself. Mrs Carlyon worshipped blue blood. She had wealth, which she inherited from a speculative grandfather, the fortunate inventor of a patent that "caught on" with the public, but of her pedigree she knew very little; and concerning that little she kept a discreet silence. She spoke of her guest as "the prince." The house had rung with "the prince" for the last fortnight, till her two daughters, Lorina and Edith, were becoming a little tired of the title.

.

Meer, or Mir Yacoob Ali Khan, was a college friend of the eldest son of the family. Ever since Mrs Carlyon had heard St George speak of him, she had urged the invitation.

"But, my dear mater, he is a foreigner, and you won't like him," protested St George, who was by no means anxious to give the invitation.

"Is he very black?" asked Lorina, in idle curiosity.

"He is not black at all," replied her brother, with a suspicion of annoyance in his tone. "Hyderabad nobles don't come from Central Africa."

Lorina laughed good-humouredly as she fastened the last button of her riding-gloves, and left the room to mount her horse. She cared nothing for princes, and still less for Asiatics, but her brother amused her. Since he had been to Oxford he often assumed a tone of superiority which sat ill upon him.

"If he is not black, then what is he like?" asked Edith, his younger sister.

"He is what you would call olive-skinned. You would take him for an Italian at first sight."

"Does he speak English?"

"As well as I do."



"And his dress?"

"Is the same as mine."

There was a pawing of the ground and a trampling of horses' hoofs in front of the house, and through the open window came the sound of old Robert's voice in expostulation.

"There's Lorina on that new chestnut," exclaimed the young man, hastily leaving the room.

"Mummy dear, I want to see that prince," said Edith, softly, her blue eyes gazing dreamily out of the long French windows of the drawing-room.

"So do I, dear; and I'll make St George ask him,' replied her mother, with decision.

Of course Mrs Carlyon had her way, and the invitation was given. But it was done verbally, and in such a lukewarm manner, that Mir Yacoob refused courteously, and without hesitation. The quick, sensitive nature of the Oriental felt instinctively that it was not spontaneous, and pride prompted the refusal. But though he refused it without a moment's hesitation, he was struck by the fact of its having been offered. From whatever cause it sprang, it could only mean friendliness on the part of St George and his family' There were many men at the University with whom the young nobleman was on intimate terms; but Carlyon was the single one amongst the number who had asked him to stay in his house and be introduced to his people. Such an invitation in his own country could only come from a relative; even from a relative it would be considered a great compliment and honour. The prince caught himself regretting that his English friend had not shown more heartiness in giving the invitation.

As time went on, the two men were drawn into greater intimacy. There was just that touch about the

son of the country squire, with his inherited sporting instincts, his plain, straightforward courtesy, and entire absence of artificiality of manner, which struck a note of sympathy in Mir Yacoob. He was drawn towards St George, and sought his society with keen appreciation. Gradually the slow nature of the Englishman warmed towards the foreigner; reserve gave way to confidence, indifference to liking, and St George and the prince became fast friends.

The terms passed quickly; "schools" were over, and the day approached when they were to go their ways into the world. St George was full of genuine regret at the parting, and he found himself repeating his invitation in a very different tone from that which he used on the first occasion. A warm light flashed into Mir Yacoob's dark eyes as he listened, and he accepted it without a trace of doubt or hesitation.

St George informed his mother that she might expect the prince. Her delight knew no bounds. In her early days, when she first became, what, in her secret soul, she termed, "Mrs Carlyon of the Hall," her wildest dreams did not aspire higher than to play hostess to the Earl of Benacre, the Lord High-Sheriff of the country. But now reality surpassed her most ambitious dreams. She was to entertain a real prince—a man of fabulous wealth, far exceeding the thousands of her grandfather; and, if St George was to be believed, he was as handsome and accomplished as he was rich.

.

Mrs Carlyon moved restlessly about the beautiful drawing-room, her ears strained to catch the sound of wheels. Her ramblings ceased as her elder daughter walked into the room. Lorina was a head taller than her mother, and there was absolutely no likeness between the two. She was twenty-one, good-looking,



outspoken to a fault, generous, high-spirited, self-reliant in her complete ignorance of the world that lay outside Winston. She was a girl after her father's own heart, inheriting his sporting instincts and his unsuspicious nature, without the weaker points—dislike of all trouble, and a desire to shirk all responsibility. Added to her love of sport was a strong liking for adventure, which was one of her father's characteristics. This liking had led her in early days into many a scrape. She had never been to school. Mr Carlyon had a prejudice against all girls' schools, believing them to be hot-beds of feminine precocity.

Mrs Carlyon regarded her daughter with disapproval.

"You don't take any interest in St George's friend," she exclained, in a thin, vexed voice, her eyes resting critically on Lorina's simple dress.

"Why, mother?" she asked, cool and impassive as the blue linen folds that fell from her waist.

Mrs Carlyon looked down at the rich silk and real laces of her own costume. The contrast between herself and her daughter was great.

"Are you not going to dress for the prince?"

Before Lorina could reply Edith entered the room, bringing with her the perfume of the purple orchids which she wore in her waistband. She was small and delicately made, like her mother, and resembled her in feature; but instead of being dark she was fair, with the fairness of the Saxon. She had not Lorina's brilliant colouring; but many preferred the roseleaf tints of her skin to the carmine of the elder sister's lips and cheeks. The anxious look which had clouded Mrs Carlyon's face, as she ran her eye over the figure of her elder daughter, gave place to one of warm approval on Edith's appearance. Edith had clothed herself in a costume which she spoke of as "a perfect dream." It

was designed by herself, and "built"—as she termed it —by one of the best London dressmakers, to whom the model proved of no little value.

"Edith has dressed, you see," remarked Mrs Carlyon, in whose opinion a woman was never "dressed" unless she wore a smart creation of the latest fashion.

"And looks her own sweet self as usual," added Lorina, with affection. Such a nature as hers harboured no jealousy.

"It's a dream," murmured Edith, in a soft, satisfied voice, as she sank into a chair with grace and ease. Her very pose showed a loving tenderness towards the expensive laces which enveloped her. Her limbs were placed instinctively in such a manner that neither angle of knee nor awkward twist of hip disturbed the rhythm of the folds; and this was not the outcome of economy—for Edith was an extravagant young woman,—her care was due to her innate love of fine and beautiful fabrics, which she regarded with the appreciative eye of an artist.

The contrast between the appearance of the sisters distressed Mrs Carlyon.

"Do go and change, Lorina; the prince will be here in a few minutes."

"Dear old mater, I'll dress for dinner; but I can't change now. I want to go to the stables, to see if Robert has carried out the orders about closing the ventilator on the east side of the loose-box he has prepared for the prince's Arab. Arabs are tender creatures, very susceptible to draughts."

Mrs Carlyon sighed as Lorina departed on an errand that might have been better left to her brother. In her vexation she accidentally overturned one of the vases. Edith rose and quietly re-arranged the flowers.

"Sit down, mummy; you have tired yourself."



She pushed forward a favourite chair, and her mother dropped into it. But even as she did so there was a sound of voices in the hall.

"The prince!" gasped Mrs Carlyon, springing to her feet again.

She was doomed to disappointment. The door was flung open, and Lorina re-appeared, her eyes sparkling with pleasure. She was closely followed by a soldierly young man, whose well-knit figure was set off by the riding-suit he wore.

"Here's Alan! I found him at the door, just about to ring the bell. For shame, Alan! You used to walk straight in at any time, just like St George. You're not going to make strangers of us now, I hope?"

"I didn't know what changes there might be in five years," he replied.

"Five years! Is it five years since you joined your battery in India? How time flies!" said Mrs Carlyon.

He exchanged greetings with them, at the same time answering a string of questions. Yes, he was on leave; he was not going to Africa; he hoped to return to India. Whilst he talked—chiefly to Mrs Carlyon and Edith—his eyes followed Lorina. She was not unconscious of his gaze, and the warm colour flushed her cheek as she met his undisguised look of admiration. Yes, there were changes, he decided in his mind. Lorina Carlyon had filled out into a superb woman, with a straight figure suggestive of cycling, riding, boating, skating, and other out-of-door sports; and she possessed a complexion that was Nature's own handiwork.

Lorina's thoughts went back to the old days as she listened to the conversation. She, too, saw a change in Alan Archdale. He was the only son of a neighbouring vicar. There was a distant connection be-

tween the two families, and Alan had always been treated as a cousin. The pale, delicate lad had developed into a man of strong character. The shyness and sensitiveness were gone. The fastidiousness, which made him, as a boy, dislike sport and rough games, had been to a great extent conquered. In place of these there was a quiet strength, which inspired confidence in others, and made men say that one day, given his opportunity, Archdale would distinguish himself.

Although he was six years her senior, he had from his earliest days been attracted towards the active, mischievous child with her brown eyes. He was fascinated by the daring tricks, in which neither her entreaty nor scorn could induce him to take a part. He gazed at her in boyish wonder as she challenged him to follow her up a ladder into one of the tall elms of the rookery, and on into the higher branches, until she was within a few yards of the swaying rooks' nests. He wondered, open-eyed, but he did not applaud. As her quick eye read disapproval she taunted him for what she chose to call his want of courage. Then a quarrel ensued, to be made up as soon as the sensitive lad recovered from the smart caused by the quick tongue.

So deeply was Mrs Carlyon interested in hearing all that Alan had to say of himself, that she forgot her expected guest. Her breath was taken away when St George's voice fell on her ear.

"Mother, let me introduce my friend, Mir Ali Yacoob Khan."

She found herself shaking hands with a tall, young man, in faultless dress, who replied to her eager, embarrassed welcome in tone and words such as her own son might have used. As she scanned his face and figure a feeling of disappointment crept over her. She



could not have explained what she expected, but the man before her did not appear in her eyes like the ideal prince she had so long pictured to herself. He was labelled English gentleman rather than Indian prince. She recovered herself sufficiently to perform her duties as hostess. She introduced him to her daughters and to Alan in turn. Mir Yacoob's eyes dwelt curiously, for a brief moment, on each of the girls; then he bowed to the gunner, on whose face there was an expression of surprise. In his astonishment Archdale was silent; he could not have been more taken aback if a brown bear had been introduced to him instead of the Mohammedan.

"Mir Yacoob is an old college friend," explained St George. "I suppose you have never come across each other in India?"

"No; we have never met," replied the stranger, with an ease that covered the slight embarrassment they all felt at Alan's strange manner. "Probably Mr Archdale has been quartered up north, whereas I live in Hyderabad."

Alan quickly recovered himself.

"I've often wished to see Hyderabad, the city of princes," he replied, courteously. "It is not at all unlikely that my battery may be sent to Trimulgherry before long, in which case I shall be close to Hyderabad."

"Then I may hope to have the pleasure of seeing you there some day. I have often played polo with the English officers of the garrison."

Alan did not reply at once, and Lorina seized the opportunity to question the stranger about his horse. She was eager to see the beautiful Arab of which she had heard so much from her brother.

"Have you brought your horse?" she asked.



"He has arrived at the station, and will be here before long."

"We have prepared a comfortable box for him. If he is fit for it, I hope you will ride with me to-morrow; or, if not, we will find you a mount from our own stables."

Mir Yacoob bowed and expressed his thanks. He did not show any sign of the surprise he felt. His eyes rested on Lorina's mother. He saw no dissent to the arrangement on her face. Mrs Carlyon caught his glance and took it to mean something quite different.

"Let me show you your room, prince," she said, rising with a rustle of silk from her chair.

She led the way, St George following his friend out of the room to help to do the honours. Lorina turned to Alan.

"It is good to see you again. Come into the garden; you won't find anything changed there."

They passed through one of the long French windows on to the smooth lawn—a lawn that had been brushed by the stiff quilted petticoats of Elizabethan dames, and swept by the soft clinging draperies of the Stuart and Georgian ladies. Alan followed with alacrity. A frown which had overshadowed his face gave place to a smile of pleasure. He linked his arm in hers as they moved towards the large fish-pond at the end of the lawn.

"You have grown, Lorina," he said, dropping back into the boy-and-girl good-fellowship of old days.

"So my dressmaker told me some three or four years ago."

"Beautiful!" he added, boldly meeting her half-indignant, half-amused glance.

"This is turning over a new leaf indeed!" she cried. "You used to tell me home-truths of a very different nature."



"I am afraid I was very rude in those days," he said, penitently.

She laughed with a sudden recollection.

"Do you remember when I climbed the cherry-tree to get you a capful of cherries? How angry you were; and what a lecture you gave me on the impropriety of girls climbing!"

"And you threw the fruit you had gathered for me into my face as you ran away. You were even more angry than I was. I not only lost my feast of cherries, but I deprived myself of your company, a sufficient punishment in itself for my priggishness. I was awfully fond of you, Lorina, in spite of all your tomboy tricks."

She shot a swift glance at him.

"So you were of your collie-dog," she rejoined, with a bluntness that was disconcerting.

"Oh! come now!" he protested. But she went on with more reminiscences.

"I shall never forget making you try to jump your horse over the hurdles old Robert had put up for me in the park."

"Yes, I remember; I couldn't ride a bit then, and I fell off. I was ignominiously pitched head-foremost over my horse's head. As if that wasn't humiliating enough, you must needs insist on having the saddles changed, and ride my awkward brute over the hurdles I had muffed."

"That was to save the animal. If he had been allowed to have his way, he would have been ruined. You were thinking only of yourself; I was thinking of the horse."

She gave the arm she touched a friendly little shake to emphasise her words. It was an old trick, and the action was involuntary. It brought back a crowd of memories to his mind and sent a thrill through his frame.

"I wasn't always thinking of myself," he said, in a tone that sent the blood to her cheek.

They left the lawn, with the gleaming pool, and he drew her, with a purpose in his mind, towards the quaint Dutch garden that lay hidden in the depths of a thick laurel shrubbery. Its symmetrical box-edged beds were ablaze with old-world flowers that belonged to a former generation. The Dutch garden had many memories for both of them. There was one scene, however, which stood out from all the rest: It came before their eyes as they passed through the wire gate leading to the prim gravel-paths.

.

It was on a certain autumn day. Lorina was then not quite seventeen years old. He had come to say farewell before leaving for India. He looked for a little regret, a little sorrow on her part, but there was none. On the contrary, she was full of warm congratulations on his escape from the paternal nest; and of pity for herself, that she, because she was a girl, was tied by propriety to her home, and, therefore, could not visit strange lands.

"I am off in a couple of days," Alan had said, as his eyes rested wistfully upon her.

Her skirts were short, but signs of the transition from child to woman were there, in the hair coiled daintily about her head; in mind she was still a perfect child.

"How glad you must be to go!"

"Glad to go!" he repeated, in surprise. "I can't say that I am pleased to leave the old home."

"You ought to be panting to get away from this narrow little country place. If I were you, I should be all eagerness and impatience to get off."

"I am not so impulsive as you are. You want to



fly through the world as you race over the hunting-field, at a breakneck pace. Now, I am one of the slow and sure people."

This was Alan in his irritating mood of priggishness. It always roused her ire, and caused her tongue to run faster than it ought.

"Indeed you are! and I fear you always will be," she said, with a hearty acquiescence which was disconcerting. Then, with swift compunction, she tried to make amends, and fell deeper in the mire. "But never mind, you are very nice in many other ways, and I daresay a foreign land will improve you." This was meant by way of comfort, whatever he may have thought of it. "You don't come up to my ideal of a soldier. You would have made a much better country parson, like your dear old father."

"Perhaps you are right," he said.

He watched her as she buried her hands in the purple Michaelmas daisies and chose a spray here and there for her vases.

"Of course I am right! If you had followed in your father's footsteps you need never have left the country."

Her back was towards him, and she did not see the amused look on his face, nor the light that shone in his eyes, as he said:

"If I stayed at home and became a country vicar, like my father, instead of going soldiering, would you marry me, Lorina?"

The girl wheeled round in sudden astonishment, and gazed at him across the mass of daisies. The thought flashed through her mind that the question was asked in pure fun, with the qualifying "if" behind it; otherwise she would be justified in believing that he had taken leave of his senses. She answered without hesita-



tion, and without a blush, in the complete innocence of her heart:

"I marry a clergyman! I should think not!" and her ringing laugh fell on his ear. "Don't you know, Alan, that the dearest wish of my heart is to get out of the country, to go abroad to Africa or India — I don't care which—and to see new lands. When I marry, the first thing I shall expect of my husband will be to deliver me from the depths of the eastern counties."

"O Lorina! Is that how you regard our beautiful land of rivers and broads?"

"You know what I mean," she cried, impatiently. "I haven't the same liberty as St George. Simply because I am a girl I have to repress all my longings to be free; you don't know how I long to be off."

He smiled at her impetuous words, and softly coaxed his moustache, after the manner of young men, as he said quietly:

"Perhaps you would rather marry me as I am, and join me in seeking adventures in the East?"

He waited for her answer with a little more anxiety than mere light banter required. There was something in his face that puzzled her.

Yet he could only be considering the question as St George might have done, prefacing it with "if I were not your brother." She half turned from him, not recognising the new Alan, and feeling uncomfortable under his earnest gaze.

"If no one else came to the rescue, it might be a good plan," she said, thoughtfully; she was but sixteen, and a veritable child. "But I do not mean to marry for ever so long; and when I do, I shall like a husband with lots of go in him—one who will not mind——" she paused, not wishing to hurt his feelings by any awkward comparisons,



nor to revive the vexed question of the propriety of her conduct. He completed the sentence for her.

"Who will not mind your vagaries?"

"Quite so."

"And I think you said that you would like to go to India. Why not go by yourself by-and-by, without a husband?"

"Mother says that a woman cannot travel in comfort without a husband or a brother when it comes to visiting the Colonies."

"Perhaps St George will take you."

She shook her head sadly.

"St George says that he never means to travel. My hopes in that direction are therefore quite dead."

Her melancholy tone was pathetic.

"Will you centre your hopes on me, then?" asked her companion, with the suspicion of a smile.

His words perplexed her. She hated ambiguity of speech as much as she disliked indecision in the hunting-field. Did he mean to imply that she was to regard him as a brother in St George's place? she asked herself; or were they still considering the marriage question? She did not see how he could fill the place of a brother.

"I wish you would not talk so vaguely, Alan," she said, with a touch of irritation. "Do you mean seriously will I marry you?"

"Yes."

"Then you should say so, and not beat about the bush. Of course, it would be impossible for you to be a real brother, and recognised as such by my mother. It is very kind of you to help me in this way. Perhaps I will marry you, but I won't make any promise.

"You won't forget?"

"Oh no; I shall remember it; and I will write and let you know. It is really very good of you to think

of marrying me," she added, gratefully, to his intense amusement. "But you will have to alter a little first, and be less meek and mild."

He met the look of impartial criticism which accompanied these words with a hearty laugh, not at all becoming the seriousness of the conversation, in her opinion.

"Very well," he said; "I will do my best to acquire a bold front and devil-may-care bearing. To show you that my intentions are good, I will begin to mend my ways at once."

And, to her intense astonishment, his arm was round her waist and his lips upon hers before she could utter another word. He had never done such a thing before, and Lorina's thoughts for a moment were decidedly of a mixed character. She found her tongue at last.

"Alan! How can you be so idiotic! It is lucky that there is no one in the garden to see," she said, with delightful simplicity, as she stooped to gather up the flowers she had let fall. "It must look so foolish."

It was evident that he did not think it foolish. Linking his arm in hers, he led her towards the house.

"It is a bargain, then; you promise to write to me when you want to come out to India. You will make the sweetest wife in the world."

With cheeks suddenly aflame, the girl withdrew her arm from his, and fled to her room. She was perplexed by his conduct, and confused by the new fit of shyness which overcame her without warning. She felt that the occasion demanded anger on her part, but, to her dismay, the righteous indignation was not forthcoming. Instead of wrath, there was a tumultuous feeling, which set her heart beating, and quickened her pulse in a most unaccountable manner. In vain she tried to control herself. The colour burned in her face, whilst she stormed

against herself and her inability to subdue the blushes at will.

"How dare he behave like that! What a donkey I was! Why didn't I box his ears and call him a fool for his pains?" she had cried, in what she had taken at the time for genuine vexation.

.

That was the last occasion on which they had met; and as Lorina turned into the old garden, the memory of his words and of the kiss rushed back upon her, as though the scene had been enacted but yesterday. Neither had her companion forgotten it.

"Do you still wish to go to India?" he asked.

In sudden alarm at what might follow, she said: "Oh, by-the-by, I must go to the stables. Mir Yacoob has brought his horse with him, and I don't think Robert understands——"

He caught her by the arm, interrupting her with the licence of an old friend.

"No; you shall not run away from me to see to the comfort of that foreigner's animal; let it take care of itself."

"That foreigner!" echoed Lorina.

He controlled himself, and said more temperately, "Well, isn't he a foreigner?"

"Certainly; but I don't quite like the tone in which you speak. It sounds as if——" she hesitated, not sure of herself in putting her half-formed thought into words "—as if you do not approve of him."

"Perhaps I do not approve of him," said Alan, with a slight emphasis on the negative, the truth bursting from his lips, in spite of his endeavour to repress it.

"You are prejudiced," she answered, hotly.

"Not at all! You don't understand; how can you? Things are so different out in India, where we do not

receive the natives on an intimate footing into our families."

Again there was an emphasis on the negative, which roused her ire.

"Why shouldn't you receive them on a friendly footing? Again I say, you are prejudiced."

"Ah! so you have begun your old quarrels again!"

They were so absorbed that they had not heard Edith's footstep.

"I came to have a chat with you, Alan," she continued. "I don't see why Lorina should have you all to herself."

The young soldier's face cleared; he welcomed the interruption, though it broke the *tête-à-tête*, for it saved him from dropping into the old habit of lecturing. He had intended to utilise his opportunity in a very different way.

"Now give an account of yourself. When are you going back to India?"

"I have only three months' leave, which gives me eight weeks in England. It is odd how every second person asks me that question, as if it were a satisfaction to know that my holiday had a limit! A question that greets you in India with the same pertinacity is, 'How do you like India?' As if anyone, on landing, could answer such a question!"

"I should reply at once, 'Very much indeed,' for I already like India," replied Lorina, promptly.

He turned on her with astonishment.

"You! Why, you have never been to India! What can you know of it to like or dislike?"

"Though we have not been to India, India has come to us, in the shape of the prince."

There was the faintest echo of her mother's tone and manner as she said it. Neither words nor manner were

natural to her, and she knew it. She knew also that such words would not sound well in his ears; the angry flush which suffused his face did not surprise her. Edith's quick eye caught the danger-signal; she stepped into the breach.

"Now tell us about yourself," she said, deliberately placing herself between them. "Have you done any fighting yet?"

"I certainly haven't heard much of 'the war's wild roar'; that's not our way of fighting in India."

"How do you fight in India?"

"We don't fight; we keep the peace. I was strongly tempted to apply for an exchange, so that I might have a turn at medal-hunting in Africa."

"Do you like that sort of thing?"

"Soldiering is nothing without fighting; of course we like it."

"And yet, in the old days, Alan, you couldn't so much as kill a rat in sport," exclaimed Lorina.

"War is not sport; but we won't talk about it. Tell me about St George; I hear he is engaged to Helen Thomson."

They talked of St George and his prospects; of how he was to marry and settle down in the county not far from the old home. There was no necessity for this fortunate young man to work for his living. His inventive ancestor had done enough to enable his grandchildren to live without entering into the vortex of competition.

"St George is a lucky fellow," said Alan, who had recovered his good humour, and was enjoying to the full the luxury of having the undivided attention of two pretty girls.

"Lorina thinks that it would have been far better for him if he had been obliged to turn out into the world and join in the great struggle," said Edith.

"It is what I should like myself, if I were a man. Because I am a woman, and the daughter of my father, I must stay at home."

There was a touch of bitterness in her voice. He looked across at her with a light in his eyes as he said, pointedly:

"We discussed the subject just before we left. I think we tried to make provision by which you could get as far as India should other means fail."

His glance brought the colour to her cheek: she had not forgotten.

"I have since learnt that there are other ways of getting out into the world and of seeing India."

"Indeed!"

He could not restrain the note of almost eager curiosity in his exclamation.

"As visitors from India can be received here, so visitors from England may be received there."

"Oh, of course; if you have friends or relatives in India, there is nothing to prevent a girl from going out on a visit. Lots do it every season."

He looked from one to the other, his curiosity unsatisfied. Both the girls were silent. Edith did not understand what Lorina meant, and Lorina had no intention of making anything more than a general statement. As neither spoke, he continued:

"At any rate, it can be done without asking natives to stay with you."

"Natives! Don't you approve of our visitor?" asked Edith, in some surprise. "We are very proud of him, and all our neighbours are envying us the possession of such a lion."

"I am afraid I think your neighbours fools."

"But don't you know that he is a prince from Hyderabad?" she said. "He has estates in several



places, and a beautiful house at Vellore, somewhere between Madras and Hyderabad. He is enormously rich, and——"

"And he rides gloriously," concluded Lorina.

"Then I need say no more," remarked Alan, with something of his old temper.

"I wonder why it is that people who have been in India dislike natives so much," said Lorina. "If they don't actually dislike them, they are, still, unable to look upon them as equals."

"Equals! Good heavens!"

"This man is in every way St George's equal," she continued, taking up the cudgels for their new friend. "He has had English tutors all his life, and he finished his education by coming to England and taking his degree at the University. He is as refined and polished as any European gentleman; he worships the same God as we do; yet Mr Barton-Smith, who made all his money in Mir Yacoob's country, and lived there half a lifetime, called him 'that black fellow,' 'that native friend of yours,' when he heard mother say that she had invited him to stay."

"Black, indeed! He is no blacker than Mr Barton-Smith himself! Mir Yacoob might be an Italian or a Spanish gentleman, as far as complexion goes. And his manners are better than Mr Smith's," added Edith, indignantly.

"Mr Smith has studied the natives of India for more than half a lifetime, and has had an opportunity of forming an opinion," said Alan.

"An opinion which is at once uncharitable and unjust," replied Lorina, warmly.

"His experience of forty years, then, goes for nothing?"

"Yes; because it is like the experience of the woman-

hater. It has given him an unjust and one-sided opinion."

"It is so hard to explain—to convince. If you could only see these people in their own country——"

"Ah, perhaps I shall, some day," interrupted Lorina.

"Come and have some tea and strawberries and cream, Alan," said Edith.

"That sounds very nice. I haven't tasted a strawberry for five years," he replied.

Yet he lingered; and Edith, seeing that she was the third person in his opinion, left them and bent her steps towards the drawing-room.

"I must go, too," said Lorina, her glance following her sister.

"One moment; I want to say something."

She fell back in obedience to his wishes. They had left the garden and were amongst the laurels. Alan caught her hand.

"When I asked you five years ago if you would let me take you to India, I meant it——"

"Then you were a ridiculous boy," she cried, with an insane impulse to stop him, though her heart throbbed with a wild desire to hear what he had to say.

"Very likely I was; but I am a wise man now—wise enough to know that you are the only woman I have ever loved, and— Oh, hang it all!"

A turn in the path brought them face to face with St George and his friend.

"The mater sent me to tell you that tea is ready."

Alan, too much perturbed to speak, held out his hand.

"What! must you be going? I suppose you Anglo-Indians despise tea. But you will come in and say good-bye. No? Then I will call for your horse. Lorina, take Mir Yacoob back to the house and introduce him to Winston strawberries and cream."



The gunner's lips closed firmly upon unuttered words more forcible than polite. He looked in vain for a sign from the girl, but there was none. He could not guess that under the smooth geniality which she was bestowing upon the prince, her heart was beating wildly as she asked herself, with passionate inquiry: Did she love her old friend? Had she crossed the Rubicon between friendship and love?

An angry light burned in Archdale's eyes as he glanced at the retreating figures of the Mohammedan and Lorina. His anger was not lessened by the fact that his artistic taste told him that they made a remarkable couple. Lorina was a typical woman of the West, whilst the prince represented all that was best of Eastern manhood.

CHAPTER II

THE LOTUS IN THE LAND OF THE ROSE

"The drop in the ocean is but water; the drop in the oyster becomes a pearl."—*Indian and Singhalese saying.*

IT was June, and the country was putting on its summer dress. Green pollard-willows that bordered the road silvered in the breeze as the wind swept over them. Stagnant water in the ditches glistened in the sun like crystal set in reedy borders. Sedge-warblers and reed-sparrows twittered their afternoon song amongst the rushes; and far away in the distance the restless plover uttered his melancholy cry. Yellow marigolds patched the green marshes with gold where the land was swampy, and the air was full of the scent of river-side flowers—meadow-sweet, yellow-rocket, and the aromatic sedge—bruised into sweetness by the red Suffolk cows.

The Arab was sufficiently recovered from its journey down to Winston to go out with its master on the following day. Soon after breakfast it was brought to the door, with two other horses, saddled for the ride of which Lorina had spoken the day before. When St George and his friend came out they found Lorina already in the saddle. Her horse was sidling impatiently along the gravel drive, scattering small stones and dust in all directions. The girl was encouraging the beast in its naughtiness.

"Come along, Mir Yacoob," she cried.

But he lingered, glancing round at St George, who was getting into his saddle.



"Isn't your father coming with us?" he asked.

"My father!" exclaimed St George. "Certainly not! He thinks a ride for the mere sake of a ride is great waste of time."

As they trotted towards the park gates, following Lorina, whose horse had not yet settled down to his work, St George added, by way of explaining the matter which perplexed his friend:

"I am my sister's chaperon for the present moment. In England, if a girl lives in the country, she need not have her father or mother constantly by her side."

"I have seen English ladies in London only," replied Mir Yacoob, apologetically.

They turned out of the park into the road, and Lorina brought her horse into line with theirs.

"What a beautiful Arab you have! With such horses your ladies must be always in the saddle," she exclaimed, watching the action of the animal with warm admiration.

Mir Yacoob smiled.

"They would be horrified at the mere thought of such a thing."

"I forgot; of course they are—what do you call it?—gosha?"

"Yes, gosha; it means hidden."

"What a pity! Just think what they lose! Wouldn't they like to come out if the men would allow them?"

Mir Yacoob became grave, and there was a touch of sadness in his voice as he answered:

"I am sorry to say that our women don't want their doors opened; they are the chief opposers to the drawing aside of the curtain."

Lorina regarded him incredulously.

"Do you mean to say that they do not wish to be

free?—free to ride as I do—to dance, to cycle, to travel? I cannot believe it."

"They would consider it an outrage on their modesty if they were expected to do any one of the things you have mentioned."

"It is incomprehensible. Some one should teach them how all these amusements, which give us health and pleasure, might be harmlessly theirs.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mir Yacoob, with sudden fire. "That is just it! We want some one to convince them of the folly of their present customs, and then there might be some hope of advance."

They passed through the old town of Beccles. On their way back they turned off to a disused racecourse lying below the town in the valley. Here they found an open grassy space, where there was more liberty for the horses. Mir Yacoob drew a deep breath and looked round.

"This is a little like the maidan or open spaces of my own country, where we practise our sports—riding, lime-cutting, tent-pegging, sword exercises, and other things."

"Have you a river like that?" asked Lorina, pointing in the direction of the Waveney, flowing in shining reaches towards the sea.

"No; a river of that size would be nothing but a rocky nullah or water-course, dry and stony, except in the rains, when a muddy torrent would sweep its bed."

"And the town?"

"Instead of those quaint old red houses, with their sloping roofs and tall chimneys, we should have flat-roofed buildings of a dazzling white; and in place of the tower, of which you are so proud, there would stand the mosque, with its dome and minarets."

As the thought of the mosque came before him, Mir



Yacoob's eye glistened. He looked round wistfully, as though something were wanting to complete the picture.

"It is the English sun that makes the difference," he cried. "Our Indian sun burns with ten times more force, and lights up the landscape till the eye is dazzled. In its light our sword-blades and spears gleam, as we play our war games."

"It must be splendid. How I should like to see it!"

"You must, indeed, see it, Miss Carlyon! And why shouldn't you? Why shouldn't you come and see my beautiful, conquered country?"

The eyes that met hers were soft with emotion. He was touched with her sympathy. It was something so new in his life to have the companionship of a woman, who was not of his family, and who talked to him with the freedom of a man.

"Show me how you ride in these games of yours," she said.

In obedience to her words, he started from her side, and put his perfectly-trained animal through different evolutions. There were too much earnestness and fire in all he did to allow it to savour of the circus. The prettiest feat was the gathering of a handful of the purple loose-strife flowers as he galloped.

"Glorious!" cried the girl, as he brought his horse up in its own length from its mad gallop, and laid the flowers on her lap.

They turned towards home at a more sober pace. As they went they planned a gymkhana course in the park, where Mir Yacoob would have more scope for the display of his riding. It was sufficient that Lorina wished it, and he resolved to satisfy her.

The evening was more delightful to Mir Yacoob than the day had been. His experience of English life had

been gained at hotels in London and rooms in Oxford. Winston Hall was not a large house; it was a roomy dwelling, which money had made luxurious and comfortable. Mrs Carlyon's taste inclined towards French furniture with gilding and ornamentation. Mr Carlyon, who loved his ease more than anything, had seen to the comfort of the house. Mir Yacoob's eyes glanced over the well-appointed dinner-table, with its fine old plate and china, its beautiful glass and flowers. From thence they travelled to the ladies—Mrs Carlyon's rich satin dress, Edith in her noiseless, white draperies, Lorina in a soft silk fabric of a delicate tint. The perfect dinner, the pleasant, easy conversation, the quiet fun and good-humour of the young people—all were the revelation of a new family life.

Mrs Carlyon was supremely happy. She had Mir Yacoob at her side—a real prince, who listened with ceremonious courtesy to all that she had to say, and in whose eyes she read approval and appreciation. His gracious manner won her heart, and before dinner was ended, she had forgotten his nationality and that he was a foreigner and a stranger.

"I feel as if I had known the dear prince for years," she confided to Edith, in a glow of enthusiasm, as they retired to the drawing-room.

"I wish he were an Englishman, or even a European from Rome or Naples. It is difficult to think of him as an Asiatic," said that astute maiden, as her eyes followed her sister. Lorina, regardless of a trailing skirt, was stepping through the open window into the garden.

"I must make up some nice parties for him, and introduce him to the county," Mrs Carlyon remarked.

"And find him a wife! eh, mummy?"

The elder lady made no reply. Her eyes followed



Edith's glance, and rested on the tall figure of Lorina, as she stood upon the lawn, scenting the sweetness of the June roses.

A day or two later Alan rode over to Winston. He found the younger members of the family in the park. The gymkhana course was marked out, and Mir Yacoob on his Arab was tent-pegging. Alan took a lance and rode at the pegs. Lorina was surprised to find that he was an adept at it, although less skilled than their guest.

"Where did you learn, Alan? You used not to do anything of the kind."

"In India. I've learnt many things since I left home besides tent-pegging."

She gazed at him incredulously. To her he was the same old Alan. But he was changed more than she was aware. His character had strengthened; the reserved, thoughtful boy had developed into the cautious, clear-headed soldier. In figure thin and wiry, he possessed greater strength and agility than many men who were bigger than himself. He was not such a pretty rider as Mir Yacoob, but was by no means contemptible by his side. Lorina looked on in wonder, and with more admiration that she had ever before felt for her old friend.

After tent-pegging they tried lime-cutting. The housekeeper had a limited supply of lemons, and when those were finished they were reduced to using green summer apples as a substitute. The swords belonged to Mir Yacoob; they were beautiful weapons of Oriental manufacture, but the green apples were too much even for their finely-tempered steel. Alan tried and failed more often than not. St George knew nothing about the handling of a sword, and preferred to be a spectator to the possible chance of slashing himself or his horse.



At last Mir Yacoob was left alone in the field. Even in his practised hand the blade failed to sever the apples as he would have liked. He kept his temper, though he was mortified. His dark eyes sparkled with the excitement of temporary defeat, and the full lips closed firmly in the determination to triumph in the end. To add to his discomfiture, some sheep, lately turned in to the park, raced aimlessly about in a terrified manner, getting as much in the way as out of it. They startled his horse, and made it swerve once or twice.

"I must have another try; I can't be beaten like this," he said, riding up to Lorina, his whole face aglow with excitement. "I can't understand why apples should be more difficult to slice than limes."

"They are so uneven and woody. Let them alone, and we'll have a go at the tent-pegs again," said Alan.

Mir Yacoob was not inclined, however, to give up the battle so tamely. Even as Alan spoke, he turned his Arab's head towards the course, and broke into a sharp gallop, with a cry in his own tongue, to which the high-mettled horse responded. The cry startled the sheep into flight again; they scudded along the very course Mir Yacoob was taking. In a few minutes he was up with them, and his attention turned from the apples to the springing animals. He singled out a huge wether and followed it. The man and his horse ran a neck-and-neck race with the sheep. Lorina heard Alan ejaculate something as he stood in his stirrups to watch the race; she turned to look at him, and was astonished at his excitement. Again her eyes sought the Mohammedan. She saw his sword flash in the sunlight as he swung it; he stooped forward, and in another moment the sheep was decapitated.

"Bravo! well done! that was grand! I could fancy



myself back amongst the Sikhs again!" cried Alan, heartily, as Mir Yacoob galloped up in triumph, all trace of defeat and disappointment banished from his face.

He looked in Lorina's eyes for an answering sign of congratulation, but both she and St George were aghast at what had happened. It was so unexpected; its very suddenness took their breath away: and to add to the confusion of the moment, here was Alan, of all people, applauding!

"I wonder what the bailiff will say. Those animals are something special, which we have lately imported from Leicestershire," remarked St George, with a grim smile.

"I will give him twice its value; I will buy him a dozen more like it," cried Mir Yacoob, excitedly. "Miss Carlyon, what do you think of that kind of sport? Isn't it magnificent?"

She was embarrassed and silent.

"You did not like it! you did not approve!" he exclaimed, with dismay. "Have I offended? I am so grieved; I didn't know the animal was a favourite."

The ring of sorrow in his tone touched her; she said kindly:

"The animal is not a pet, but we are not used to such sport. You have startled me."

He gazed at her in astonishment.

"I thought you admired all kinds of sport. I heard you speak of hunting and shooting with the greatest enthusiasm only half-an-hour ago."

"This did not seem like sport; it was more like butchery."

"And yet the feat is more difficult than stalking a stag or shooting a hare. I don't understand it: you applaud the gun and condemn the sword; you rejoice

over the death of the deer from a hidden shot, and you shudder at the killing of a sheep openly pursued."

Lorina caught an amused look on Alan's face. In days gone by it was she who had been the champion of sport. The tables were strangely turned, and she felt herself to be in a false position altogether.

"It was the mode of killing, I suppose; and the fact of the sheep being a domestic animal."

"What are pheasants nowadays but domestic birds? And as for the mode of killing, it is that which makes it sport," said Mir Yacoob, with conviction.

"Yes, Lorina," added Alan, in further explanation. "If two men held the animal, and Mir Yacoob stuck a knife into its throat, you might reasonably call it butchery. But he hunted the creature in the open where it had a chance of escape. He swung his sword at the risk of slashing himself or his horse, and by pure skill he nicked its head off. I wish I could cut off a sheep's head in that way; I assure you that I should be immensely proud of myself."

"I'm so sorry, Miss Carlyon. Had I known what you would have thought of it, I assure you I wouldn't have touched the animal. It crossed my path and met its fate by the will of Allah. As my eye fell on it scudding along before me, the thought suddenly entered my head that here was an opportunity of showing you one of our sports; and it was so infinitely more to my mind than apples."

His pathetic apology brought the laughter to her eyes.

"I should like to see the bailiff's face when he hears what we've been doing," she exclaimed.

"I shall have a bad half-hour with him to-morrow morning," said St George, ruefully.

"But won't the man be satisfied with the full value of the sheep? Surely he can get another. Besides,



the sheep are yours to do what you like with; why should he complain?"

"We're not quite such autocrats as you are, Mir Yacoob," replied St George, good-naturedly. "With all our boasted freedom, we're not always able to do exactly what we like with our own. However, I'll make it all right with my father and the bailiff, so don't trouble any further."

After the killing of the sheep there was no more gymkhana. By tacit consent they left the ground, rode back to the house, and sent the horses to the stable. Mir Yacoob took his swords to his own room, wiped them carefully, and put them away. Lorina and Alan strolled into the garden.

"That was an extraordinary thing for Mir Yacoob to do," said Lorina.

"It was a most magnificent bit of swordsmanship. I should have no chance at all with that fellow if we met as enemies on the battlefield; he seems to be born to it," he replied, with generous envy.

"You don't mean to say that you are envious?" she exclaimed, stopping to look at him in wonder. It was so unlike the old Alan to wish to be proficient in anything that was sporting.

"Not envious exactly; but I should be very proud of myself if I could use my sword as he does."

"I'm glad to find that you have a good word for our friend."

"Oh, I like him well enough, personally, and don't want to meet a better fellow."

"But you don't like his presence here. It's no use your denying it; you show it frequently."

Alan made an impatient movement with his hands, as though he were dumbly protesting against being misunderstood.

"I wish you could see him in his own country."

"I daresay he would be just the same."

"Possibly; but his people would be very different."

"And you condemn him because his people are not as polished as himself?"

'His relations——"

She interrupted him.

"A man is not responsible for his relatives; but tell me, what are they like—the ladies, I mean?" she asked, with feminine curiosity.

"Ah! there's the knotty point of the case. That's exactly what I, as a man, would never be permitted to find out. That's where the inequality comes in. St George allows Mir Yacoob to come into the bosom of his family, but Mir Yacoob wouldn't dream of returning the compliment."

"Yet I heard him ask St George to come and pay him a visit in India."

"Yes; but St George would not be allowed to see anything of his womenkind. St George would never so much as set eyes upon them, far less speak to them. He might live half a lifetime with Mir Yacoob, and he would know no more of his inner domestic life than he knows now. And, if I were St George, I would not extend my hospitality to a man who would object to receive me on the same terms."

"I don't agree with you at all. Mir Yacoob conforms to all our rules with the grace of an Englishman. Why shouldn't St George visit him under the same conditions, and conform to his social rules?"

"Oh! if you take that view of the case, of course I have nothing more to say; but such a condition of things is a little galling to one's pride."

"That's exactly it! It's all insular pride," said Lorina, warmly, and with a finality which irritated him.



"I deny that my pride is insular," retorted Alan, with equal ardour. "My pride is the outcome of the chivalry which honours your sex, Lorina. I wish you would take my word for it that St George has made a mistake——"

"I prefer to trust to my own judgment," she cried, stopping him in his speech with small ceremony.

"Which is a polite way of telling me I am a fool."

Her cheeks reddened with anger, and her eyes sparkled under the emotion. She looked remarkably handsome as she stood before him, and he was aware of it. His annoyance at her obstinacy vanished before the admiration she evoked.

"You put matters too crudely. I may not have implicit faith in your judgment, but all my life long you have been more to me than any other woman——"

"Yes; because I have been such a thorn in your flesh," she interposed, mollified, but uneasy at his lapse into sentiment.

"Hang it all, Lorina; you drive a fellow to desperation. I've been longing to get a quiet half-hour with you. I've been wanting to tell you that ever since I left you, years ago, I have been thinking of you. I love you more than——"

She would not hear him to the end.

"And here we are quarrelling away as usual."

The girl's ringing laugh echoed across the rose-beds — a hearty, mirthful, good-tempered laugh, showing how fleeting her anger was. It was contagious, and the frown passed from her companion's face as he was gradually drawn, in spite of himself, into it. Then, as their mirth subsided, he said, softly and earnestly:

"Lorina, do listen."

The tale which he had to tell was no longer to be withheld. Lorina listened with a fluttering heart and

conflicting emotions. Did she love him? Even as the words poured from his lips she asked herself the question. Yes. But, if yes, why were they always quarrelling? Then, too, she did not feel a bit like the girls in the books, who melted into the arms of their lovers at the first words of love. The thought made her draw away from him. As no answer was forthcoming, the young man pleaded the more earnestly. He told her that he wanted to give her the dearest wish of her heart, and take her to India. (She would rather go independently of him.) He longed to have her by his side all his life. (What a time they would have, considering that they could not be together ten minutes without squabbling.) Then as Alan pressed her for an answer she gave him one that was a mass of contradictions. She liked him, but she didn't love him, or any other man. She did not wish to be married at all; she only wanted her liberty.

"It had better be 'no,' Alan," she said, at last, trying to give him a refusal without hurting his feelings. But he was not the man to take a half-hearted "no," as Lorina found to her consternation.

"I won't take an answer like that. I won't take an answer at all now; I'll take something else."

Here followed what she had been dreading all along, a repetition of the scene in the Dutch garden over the Michaelmas daisies. Scarcely had she withdrawn herself from his arms, his hand still retaining its grasp upon hers, when Mir Yacoob was seen approaching. He walked towards them with easy self-assurance. It never once crossed his princely mind that he might be in the way, and he did not see the shade of annoyance that clouded Alan's face. His eyes were on the English girl, and from her he



received a welcoming smile, born of a strange nervousness that was new to her. The Mohammedan's advent was the signal for Archdale's departure, and ten minutes later they watched his retreating figure from beneath the shade of the old ilex.

There was some time yet before she need dress for dinner. St George had disappeared to write his daily letter to his *fiancée*. Edith and her mother had not yet returned from their drive, taken late in the afternoon now that the days were so long. It was one of those moments which Mir Yacoob was learning to prize, when he could talk freely to Lorina without fear of interruption. The girl turned the more readily to him to-day to distract her mind from thoughts of Alan. She plunged into talk about his country. It was a subject of never-ending delight to him. In addition to the pleasure of talking there was always a new charm of having such a listener.

"You were asking me, Miss Carlyon, about introducing ladies of our family to our friends. Our customs forbid it, and they are unable to be present at any of our social gatherings."

"Your entertainments must be very dull without the ladies. Wouldn't your mother and sisters be glad to relax the rules a little?"

"I think not. They would oppose it even more strongly than the men."

"How I should like to convince them of their folly! How I should like to give them the same freedom that I enjoy!"

Mir Yacoob let his dark eyes rest on her as he replied:

"I wonder if they could ever learn to use their freedom as you do yours."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid that under their present conditions they would hardly understand the delicate lines of decorum and dignity, which are apparently inherited instincts with you."

She thought of some of her old escapades, and smiled.

"English girls can't always claim to be dignified and decorous."

"At any rate, here is an evidence of what I mean. I am able to talk to you without the presence of any older lady.

"And couldn't one of your own country-women, who had been educated, talk and listen to a gentleman in this way—a friend of the family, for instance?"

Mir Yacoob shook his head.

"It would be impossible. Even if she had the courage to do it, she could not preserve her dignity."

"But if you were to marry an intelligent woman, who knew something of European ways, and who agreed with your views, couldn't you bring her out and let her show the ladies of her country how it might be done?"

"Where am I to meet such a woman, Miss Carlyon, free from prejudice and possessing dignity and judgment? She does not exist amongst my own nation."

He bent his dark eyes upon her again, as though he strove to fathom the sympathy that he found so sweet. She was moved with a great desire to help him in his difficulty.

"If you can't find such a woman in your own country, seek her in another. The world is open to you, with your birth, your education, and your wealth."

She did not realise the import of her words. She certainly was not aware of the direction she was giving to his thoughts. An older woman with more experience



and knowledge would have said less, or she would have been more careful to explain what she meant.

"I think you are right," he said, after a slight pause. "My wife should belong to another nation. My mother would then be unable to control and rule her. I should have a pleasant companion; and we might make a happy home such as you English create around you. I envy St George his prospects with Miss Thomson as his wife. I have been asking myself of late why my life should not be like his."

"Ah! Why not, indeed! It seems to rest entirely with yourself."

There was silence between them which the young man did not care to break. The girl had forgotten her own affairs for the moment, and was busy with impossible day-dreams, thinking of the kind of woman who might be found to make Mir Yacoob happy. What nationality should she be? An English girl would be too cold, would not possess enough enthusiasm and sympathy. An American girl would expect too much. No; she must belong to one of the sunny countries, France, Spain, or Italy, and be full of sympathy with his cause. It was a noble work that lay before him; how could she give him the help he needed?

That evening, after dinner, whilst St George and his friend smoked their cigarettes, Mir Yacoob said:

"Will you think me very rude if I ask you a question?"

"Not at all. What is it?"

"Is Mr Archdale going to marry your sister?"

"Not that I know of."

"Your customs are different from ours. I thought perhaps your father might have arranged it with his."

"Even if the parents desired it, it would have to be left entirely in the hands of the persons concerned."

"But if Mr Archdale were instructed by his father, he would, of course, carry out his wishes, and do his best to win the lady, wouldn't he? And she, on her part, would consider her parent's desires."

"My sister will marry to please herself and no one else. Parents in our class of life are careful, as a rule, not to interfere with their children's love affairs."

"Then, if Miss Carlyon is absolutely free to make her choice, why is it that she hasn't done so some time ago?"

"Our girls don't marry so young as yours, and they are not easy to please. I suppose that she has not yet met the man of her choice."

The Mohammedan was silent for a time. His good taste told him that he was on delicate ground. It was not the custom in England, nor in his own country to discuss family affairs with strangers. He did not consider himself a stranger with regard to St George; he had, therefore, ventured to ask so much. There was one more question which he desired to put. He glanced at the placid young Englishman, and then said:

"What would happen if Miss Carlyon chose a man of whom your father did not approve?"

"Such a thing is extremely unlikely. We don't ask undesirable men to the house; and my sister is able to judge for herself. She is in no danger of choosing an undesirable man."

"You have a wonderful faith in the judgment of your women. I suppose they are worthy of it."

"In my opinion they are," replied St George, with the confidence of youth.

"I wonder where we should be if we did such a thing," mused Mir Yacoob, relapsing into silence.



CHAPTER III

A BRILLIANT MARRIAGE

'Of threads of palm was the carpet spun,
Whereon he kneels when the day is done,
And the foreheads of Islam are bowed as one."
—WHITTIER

MIR YACOOB found the life at Winston more to his liking each day that he stayed. Its reality charmed him. There was an entire absence of artificiality about it. It was different from anything that he had experienced in London. The freedom of converse, the family life, the perfect harmony, belonged to a world hitherto unknown to him. The person whom he did not understand was Mrs Carlyon. She was the only one who paid him any court. He recognised the fact that she was sincere in what she did. When she introduced him to her acquaintances—never failing to use the title prince—she was filled with pride. Why was she so pleased and proud to call him her friend? What return did she expect for it? To a man, who from his birth had been taught to look for a selfish motive in every action, her conduct was inexplicable. There was another matter which puzzled him, having never before been received *en famille* in an English country house. This was the absence of chaperonage.

It happened more than once that he and Lorina were deep in conversation discussing the ever-absorbing topic, India's women and their emancipation. Suddenly he became aware that they were alone. A glance at the window assured him that no one watched from that quarter. The door was closed; more remarkable still,

Mrs Carlyon herself had closed it, and she was the last to leave the room. No sign of uneasiness appeared on Lorina's face. She continued talking with the same freedom as if her mother were present. Then there could be nothing unusual about it, he thought. Such a situation was impossible in his own country. Here it occurred frequently, and nine times out of ten it was Mrs Carlyon who brought it about.

His surprise quickly gave place to pleasure. He watched for the opportunity of a *tête-à-tête*, and became conscious of a feeling of disappointment if the day passed without one. These talks and draughts of sympathy were soul-stirring and intoxicating in their novelty.

Alan dropped in on them two or three times, and they encountered him in the morning ride which had become a daily occurrence. Lorina greeted him with her old friendliness, but took care to give him no chance of repeating his protestations of love. It was actually a relief to hear that he would be away ten days in town. His leave was passing all too rapidly. In another three weeks he would be rushing across the Continent towards the East. As he took Lorina's hand he managed to whisper a few words in her ear. She shook her head and her colour deepened. She glanced involuntarily at Mir Yacoob, and caught his eyes fixed upon her. The look made her heart bound strangely. She turned and left the room.

The days passed, and still the prince stayed on at the Hall, a welcome guest with all. He amused Mr Carlyon with his tales of sport. The squire had at first taken no more notice of St George's friend than courtesy demanded. But when he discovered what an excellent sportsman he was, and what an eye he had for a horse, his interest was awakened; and he too made claims on the time and attention of his guest.



The neighbours were becoming used to the sight of the prince and his Arab. As soon as they had assured themselves that he was neither savage nor black, they received him with open arms, and took infinite pains to secure his presence at their entertainments. Mrs Carlyon was indeed envied the possession of such a lion, as Edith had said. One day an intimate friend was calling. The prince and Lorina slowly paced the lawn deep in conversation. The visitor's curiosity could not be restrained. She said:

"Mrs Carlyon—forgive me, but I must speak—what a handsome couple they make!"

The mother's heart swelled with pride. She understood what was meant. Yet she strove to hide her feelings. The prince could marry where he chose; it was not likely that he would think of the daughter of a commoner.

"Perhaps he has a wife already in India," her friend ventured to say.

"Oh no. I asked him soon after he arrived, and he assured me that he had no wife."

"I wonder if Lorina will one day be a princess?"

The foolish words rang in Mrs Carlyon's ears, and her brain was filled with roseate dreams in which she saw herself introducing "my daughter, the princess," to a wondering and envious world. Her eyes frequently rested on the unconscious girl, who little guessed that her mother was mentally elevating her to the rank of royalty.

It was a glorious evening. The nightingales had finished nesting, and were silent. But the blackbirds and thrushes still sang their praises at the setting of the sun. The rooks cawed noisily in the elms; and from the valley came the distant cry of the marsh-birds. Dinner was over, and the pleasant family party



which gathered round the squire's table dispersed. Edith and her mother sought the chairs on the lawn. Lorina, with a light wrap round her shoulders, joined them there.

"How energetic you look! Where are you going?" asked Edith, as she settled herself and her laces on a nest of silken cushions.

"I promised to show Mir Yacoob the new cottages we have lately built on the home farm. It was too hot to walk before dinner. Where is he?"

"Over there. I wonder what he is doing."

Edith pointed to the lawn on the west side of the house. They could see him standing motionless, his back to them, and his head bent.

"He looks as if he were worshipping the setting sun," remarked Lorina.

"He's not a fire-worshipper, my dear," said Mrs Carlyon. She never lost an opportunity of saying a good word for her prince. "He believes all the Old Testament. He is named after one of the Patriarchs, only he calls it Yacoob instead of Jacob. I cannot think of him as a foreigner. He is so English in his ways he might be my own son."

"I shall be back in an hour, and shall be glad of some tea when I come in; coffee for Mir Yacoob, as usual," said Lorina, as she moved away.

Mir Yacoob came out of his reverie, and turned to await her coming.

"You have chosen the best place to study the sunset. The colours are beautiful this evening. I notice that you often watch the sunset; it reminds you, probably, of your own sunny country."

He looked at her for a moment, and then said, simply and reverently:

"I was praying."



The girl was surprised into silence.

"All good followers of the Prophet say their prayers at sundown. I come here because I can see the sun best from this spot, when it is low on the horizon. I ought to spread my carpet and fall on my knees; but it would attract attention, so I stand. In my own land there is nothing unusual in praying at sunset in a reverent attitude."

There was a simplicity and freedom from false shame in Mir Yacoob, which was the very essence of manliness. It was impossible not to feel admiration for the man, who had the courage to render to God the things which were God's, regardless of his own convenience and the opinion of others.

"You are an example to us," was all that Lorina could find to say.

"We don't pretend to set examples. A Mussulman is forbidden by his religion to discuss his creed outside the Faith, and he makes no attempt to proselytise or attract attention to his religion. Perhaps I ought not to be speaking of such a matter to you, Miss Carlyon, but——" he hesitated, and glanced at her as though seeking encouragement to continue his confidences—"you draw from me many things which I should not care to mention to anyone else."

"I wish I could do more even than listen and give you my sympathy."

"Your sympathy is a great gift," he rejoined, quickly, and in a low voice.

There was silence between them, which neither cared for the moment to break.

"The thought of universal prayer at sunset is a beautiful idea," she remarked, presently.

"It is better than any clock or bell," he replied. "At sunset throughout the world the voice of Islam is raised

to God. Those who can go to the mosque pray there; but those who are at work leave it and pray where they are, always towards the setting sun."

"Are the same words used by all alike?"

"The call to prayer is the same. Bells are not lawful for us; so the voice of the muezzin calls aloud in Arabic from the mosque, 'God is great,' 'There is no God but God,' 'Mohammed is the Prophet of God,' and the people repeat the words."

As they walked, they passed by lane and footpath, under hedges where the honeysuckle scented the air and the briar-rose shed its petals on the bank below; where the pink mallow, the yellow toad-flax, and the white convolvulus had replaced the primrose and violet of the spring.

The buildings stood on a plot of ground which had been cleared of trees; they were practically finished, but at present had no tenants. Lorina unlocked the door of one, and they entered. Her companion was interested to see how the labourer was housed.

"Very few cottages are like this; but when houses are rebuilt now, they are made with all these improvements which you see; cupboards, shelves, glazed tiles, and coloured glass."

"I can understand the advantages of the cupboards and shelves and a good cooking-stove; but why coloured glass and glazed tiles?"

"It costs very little more to make the building pretty as well as comfortable."

"I can quite believe that; but it is not a question of expense. I want to know why the houses of the poor should be beautified."

"To give them pleasure, and elevate their tastes."

"But why should you elevate their tastes? They are labourers on the land; there is nothing artistic

about their work. It seems to me to be a dangerous thing to cultivate a liking amongst the masses for what is beyond their reach."

"This is not beyond their reach. What you see here is possible in every cottage, and it is undoubtedly a civilising influence."

"Then it is prompted by philanthropy and not by religion?"

"Yes."

"And if it is good for your people on that score, it should be good for mine?"

He put this remark in the form of a question, and Lorina replied warmly:

"Most certainly; these are just the efforts you should make. It is hopeless to expect a universality of religion to bind the world together, though it may be one of the gifts of the future. But there is nothing to prevent a universality of civilisation."

They had finished their inspection of the houses. After a glance at the gardens, which were being laid out, they turned towards home.

"It would be an entirely new departure in my country to build ornamental dwellings for the poor," said Mir Yacoob, with an amused look upon his face. "I never heard of such a thing being done except by the English Government. An ornamental lodge was built at the gate of one of the English Residences. The lodge-keeper was told that he might live in it, but that he must keep it clean. Not seeing how both these things were to be accomplished, he made a mud hut behind it, thatched it with palm-leaves, and surrounded himself with his domestic dust-heaps. The lodge was a model of cleanliness, and served as a screen for his conservatism."

Lorina laughed at the story.

"I'm afraid you have a very difficult task before you, if that is how your efforts will be received."

He grew serious again.

"My heart fails me when I think of what reform means amongst my people. You have a saying that charity should begin at home. My reforms may very well begin in my own house."

"There, at least, you are master," exclaimed Lorina.

Mir Yacoob did not reply. He was master of many things in his house, but was his authority supreme? He had never tested it in certain quarters; there had been no occasion to do so; perhaps the time might come when the trial would have to be made. Then there must be no question of failure. His imperious spirit would not brook such a thing.

"Whatever I take in hand must and shall succeed," he said, more to himself than to his companion. "But I wish that I did not stand so much alone."

His dark luminous eyes were fastened upon her as she said:

"Ah! if I could only help you, how glad I should be!"

"Would you help me if you could?"

"You know that I would. But how can I?"

Again there was a pause, eloquent to him, mysterious to her, as she waited for his reply. The words fell with a startling distinctness upon her ear:

"You can help me by becoming my wife."

There was a regal dignity about his tone which compelled her to listen as he pleaded his cause. He spoke of the great work they might do together for the women of his country; they might exemplify in their lives the new doctrines of liberty which they preached. They would not be living for themselves alone, but for a great and good cause. In addition, what life and light she might bring into his own home, opening to him domestic



bliss such as he could never attain with one of his own nation!

His pleading fascinated her: it was disinterested; it was noble. Had he urged his love and a personal selfish happiness she would not have listened. The most subtle wooer could not have chosen a more seductive argument. She had been longing for some object to live for, and craving for years to go out into the unknown world, to devote herself to some cause, some great philanthropical scheme, something beyond the work of a missionary. Here was the opportunity. It had come suddenly, and with unexpected conditions; but it was the opportunity all the same; it must not be lightly thrown aside. Again that low, earnest voice pleaded in her ear with an insistence which would not be denied.

"Miss Carlyon, think of the great good you may do, Think of what your example of dignified freedom and independence may be to the ladies of my country. Consider what you will be to me with your counsel. Can any aim in life be nobler? Can any duty be stronger than that of devoting one's whole existence to the good of one's people?"

"You do me a great honour, Mir Yacoob," she said, at last. "I must have time to think over it. Is there no other way in which I can help you to do this work? Cannot I go out as the missionaries go, and teach independently as I am?"

"It would be useless, worse than useless!" he exclaimed, vehemently. "No; take your place amongst our women as one of them. Be a sister to them. And give me the right to protect you and uphold your teaching."

Thus he spoke, without one word of love or passion. Such words before marriage were foreign to all his traditions. But she had only to look in his eyes to

learn that there was something more than philanthropy in his proposal.

"I will give you your answer to-morrow morning," she said.

They were nearing the Hall. He stopped her as they reached the little gate that opened from the park into the grounds.

"One word more, Miss Carlyon. You have no fear of making your home in India?"

"None whatever. I should pay frequent visits to England."

She looked up at him. There was yet something more that was unspoken, and she waited for it. It was contrary to all his instincts to ask for personal consideration. The lover and not the prince spoke now.

"Do you like me?"

A fortunate fate made him use the word "like" instead of "love." It was with a new anxiety, foreign to anything he had ever felt before, that he listened for her answer. It was simple, and it satisfied him.

"Yes; very much."

The golden glow of the sky had faded into greys, except low down on the horizon. The birds were silent; only the restless corncrake cried in the distance. They finished their walk in silence. Mir Yacoob left her at the door, and Lorina went straight to the drawing-room, where Mrs Carlyon was sitting with tea and coffee ready on a table beside her. She gave her daughter a cup, and looked round for her guest. Before she could ask any questions, Mir Yacoob entered the room. He took his coffee from her hands, and when it was finished he said:

"You have been very kind to me, Mrs Carlyon, and I have been very happy here. I am going to ask a favour. May I give this to your daughter?"



He drew from his little finger a magnificent diamond ring. The stones were superb, fit for the hand of a princess. Mrs Carlyon's heart beat, and she looked at her eldest daughter with a shade of anxiety. Would Lorina accept such a gift? and, if so, what did it mean? Without waiting for a reply, Mir Yacoob turned to Lorina.

"Will you put it on, Miss Carlyon?"

The words conveyed a quiet command, which did not escape her ear. She hesitated, for she had no intention of accepting an engagement-ring. He noted the doubt, and was quick to guess its cause. With the tone of a man who was accustomed to rule, he said again:

"Please put it on. It is only a token of friendship. Please wear it as such."

She lifted her eyes from the sparkling stones and met his steadily. There was that between them now which no one else shared. She slipped the ring on to her finger. Again he was stirred to his innermost soul. He wanted to be alone—alone with himself and the new emotions that were rioting in his heart. He rose, and, bidding them good-night, left the room. Lorina glanced at his retreating figure. Before her mother could frame the question which was trembling on her lips, she too had disappeared.

"Don't ask any questions, mummy," purred Edith, soothingly, in her ear. "It will all come right as you wish."

Yet Mrs Carlyon had never opened her heart to her younger daughter concerning her dreams for the future.

The following morning Mir Yacoob lost no time in seeking a quiet moment with Lorina. She gave him the opportunity, and was ready with her reply. The man's whole being thrilled as he listened, but he re-

pressed every sign of emotion. He merely took her hand and pressed it as he thanked her.

Various and conflicting were the sentiments of the family when they heard of the proposal and of Lorina's acceptance of it. The squire was disturbed in his mind, and inclined to be obstructive, as far as his indolent nature would allow. His wife, on the contrary, could not conceal her satisfaction. St George was passive, ready to leave his sister to decide for herself. Edith sided with her mother. Beside the attraction of rank and wealth coming into the family, Edith had an eye to the future. With Lorina married, she would be Miss Carlyon, and have the undivided attention of society. There was one person to be reckoned with, however, who was likely to have something to say on the subject. This was Alan. Two days after the engagement had been announced, he arrived with as little ceremony as a cyclone. He strode into the drawing-room, taking them all by surprise. He found only Lorina and Edith there. Lorina was in the act of writing to him to tell him of her engagement, urged thereto by Edith. It was not a task she relished, and she would fain have put it off; but Edith had caught her in a favourable moment, when brother and lover were away, and had almost forced her to take up her pen. She glanced at the intruder, and prepared herself for the worst with a shudder. Like the rest of the Carlyons, she hated emotion, though she could lose her own temper now and then on rare occasions. Alan was furiously angry, and he did not attempt to hide it.

"What is this I hear? It can't be true! Tell me, Lorina, that the neighbours are lying!"

He looked imploringly from one girl to the other. They both remained silent. Then he turned again to Lorina.

"You are not going to marry that infernal native?"

Lorina rose from her seat, and faced him.

"Silence, Alan! How dare you speak like that of my future husband!"

He leaned heavily on the back of a chair, and gazed at her as if her words had stunned him.

"You are mad," he cried, when he had found his tongue.

Edith approached him, and took him gently but firmly by the arm.

"Come away, Alan," she said, softly, for she was sorry for him.

"Yes, you are right; this is no place for me. Lorina, I cast you out of my life. Would to heaven I could cast you out of my heart. I would sooner have stood by your grave than have seen this thing happen. It is your mother's doing. God forgive her for the evil which she has wrought, and which will come—I say *will come*—on you."

He uttered the last words with a prophetic solemnity, which made her shudder, even though she gave no credence to his wild speech. His violence shocked her; she had never seen him so angry, and she turned from him in disgust. If she had had any doubts as to which of the two men she liked best, they were set at rest now. It was with a sense of relief that she saw him depart, and heard the wheels of his dog-cart roll away.

His visit was in every way a failure. It not only planted a wide gulf between them, but it confirmed her in her determination to help the prince at all costs. There was still her father's opposition to overcome. But he was in a minority. Whilst he considered the question, his wife, like the proverbial lady of the story, began her preparations. Mrs Carlyon hoped to have

silenced his objections by boldly announcing the engagement. He said nothing at first; but when he found that she was already beginning to give orders to the tradesmen, he roused himself into something like activity.

"I will give in to the engagement, as you seem to have set your hearts on it; but there must be no wedding at present."

"No wedding!" cried Mrs Carlyon, in dismay.

"What do you know of the man?" he asked.

"We know he is rich. Look at the settlements he proposes to make; they are princely. Look at the jewels he has already given her. And look at the man himself. Can a girl desire anything more? He is perfect in every way. I have already taken him to my heart as a son."

"That's all very well. What I want to know is, whether his people will receive her with the same enthusiasm as you lavish on him?"

"Of course they will. His mother is devoted to him. She will love his wife as a daughter."

Mr Carlyon smiled, in spite of his annoyance.

"You think that the foolish mother is common to all countries; all the same, I would rather that Lorina saw his people before she entered the family. Let her go out to India under some lady's charge, and see what the life is like. Then she will at least marry with her eyes open."

"What! And have no wedding here! screamed Mrs Carlyon.

The thought was too much for her; she burst into floods of tears, which caused the poor squire to bolt, feeling as if he had behaved like a brute. She sought her daughters and amidst much sobbing told them of their father's proposition. The tears ceased to flow as Lorina spoke:



"I shall not go to India as a spy."

"A spy?"

"That's what it would be. It would show suspicion and distrust. I am not going to marry Mir Yacoob's family, mother. If it is only the family to which father objects, you may go on with your preparations at once."

When the squire learned his daughter's views he was more than ever perturbed. He tried a fresh argument, and suggested that she would lose caste amongst the neighbours by marrying an Asiatic.

Unfortunately for this theory, the neighbours themselves defeated it by flocking in to congratulate Mrs Carlyon on the engagement. The prince was a prince. His nationality mattered very little where such a title was concerned. In addition to the title there was his enormous wealth, which in Mrs Carlyon's mouth became fabulous. The ground being hopelesly cut away beneath the squire's feet, he went direct to Mir Yacoob himself and explained his wishes. The young man listened without a word and heard him to the end. Then, to Mr Carlyon's surprise, he agreed with him. If Miss Carlyon desired it, undoubtedly it would be the best plan to pay a visit to India before she became his wife.

"There will have to be a Mohammedan rite, of course," concluded Mir Yacoob.

"Oh! is that so?" replied the squire, rather helplessly.

"Certainly; and until that is performed she will not be considered my wife in the eyes of my people. I should like it to take place in India. I wish my mother to be present and to give her consent. It is necessary that she should do so."

"Can't you be married without her presence and consent?"

"Yes, if I wish."

"The marriage would be binding?"

"Binding in every way," was the decisive reply.

"But for private reasons you wish her to be present?"

"Yes," was the emphatic answer.

"And the English ceremony?"

"That can take place when and where you please."

In his secret soul he regarded the English ceremony as of no importance. It would have no value in the eyes of his family. The Mohammedan rite would be the important one which would place his wife in her proper position before his country's men and women; and this he determined should be the most honourable of the three forms by which the men of Islam bind themselves to their helpmeets. Mir Yacoob, with the reserve instinctive to his birth, did not explain this to his English friends. He merely expressed himself willing to fall in with any arrangement that the squire might wish to make. This talk with his prospective son-in-law reassured the troubled father, and gave him confidence in the young man. All doubts were removed, and he felt certain that his daughter was not placing herself in a false position. Active opposition ceased from this time, and he sank into his usual indolent apathy, shifting responsibility on to his wife's shoulders and washing his hands of the affair.

The plan of going to India single and free was excellent, but it was strenuously opposed by Lorina herself. Such a course showed suspicion and distrust, she said, and she would not take advantage of Mir Yacoob's generosity. She insisted on having the English marriage performed. Backed by her mother and sister, the squire was over-ruled. Mir Yacoob was pleased with this exhibition of faith in him. As for Mrs Carlyon, she was in a seventh heaven of delight. She entered into her preparations with zest. Aided by

Edith, the wedding promised to be the success of the season.

It was arranged that Mir Yacoob should leave England immediately after the ceremony to prepare his palace at Hyderabad for the reception of his wife. Lorina was to follow a fortnight later, in company with a lady who knew India. They were to be received as guests by the prince's mother, the Begum, at her country house, whither Mir Yacoob himself would escort them. There, in the privacy of the harem, Lorina could see for herself in a few weeks what the life was like. If it was not to her mind she could return to England, her father had told her.

"But, dear father, I am marrying to live in India, not in England. I will come and see you frequently, but my home is to be in my husband's country."

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Throughout the ceremony the prince was calm and self-possessed. It was evident that the tying of the knot was more to her than to him. In her eyes he was her husband, and she was irrevocably bound to him; in his eyes she was still Miss Carlyon. The rite was nothing more than a betrothal. Yet he was not altogether unmoved when it was over.

Bride and bridegroom stood side by side in the drawing-room of a large hotel in London, in which city the wedding had taken place. She still wore her bridal dress. The diamonds that glittered on her arms, neck, and hair were worth a king's ransom. The cake had been cut, the champagne passed round, and the guests with many congratulations had, for the most part, departed. The temporary parting was close at hand. Mir Yacoob looked at the woman who called him husband. For a moment his self-repression gave way, and there swept across his soul a sudden passionate

desire to take her away with him, to pluck the flower that was his according to the laws of her country. For the first time the word "wife" was used, and it thrilled him strangely. Lorina's manner, too, was slightly changed. As she slipped her arm in his, she seemed to take a new position and to place herself under his protection. It partly bridged a gulf which had hitherto yawned between them.

"I am sorry that the ceremony cannot be completed now; it seems like distrusting you, Yacoob," she said.

"It is no distrust; it is nothing but a most reasonable wish on the part of your father, and he is quite right."

Although he spoke with a vibration of repressed emotion in his tone, his manner was still the same as that which he had shown at Winston. He did not presume on the new tie which was no tie to him.

"I hope your mother will not be inconvenienced by the plans we have made; there has been no time to consult her. She may not care to have an English guest."

"Not at all. You must not expect to see much of her. Although she is far in advance of most Mohammedan ladies, she is not like Mrs Carlyon, and is unaccustomed to visitors."

There was not much time left for further conversation. The moment came for the farewells to be spoken. Mir Yacoob shook hands with the few intimate friends and members of the family who remained to see him off. Last of all he stood before his wife. She placed both her hands in his, and her eyes met his with a steady look of trust.

"Lorina," he said, softly, lingering over the name, "I must get used to your name, Lorina. It is difficult to express my gratitude, but my life shall show it. I have no fear for our happiness if you will be brave."



"Nor have I; and I count the days to the time when I shall meet you in your own country."

"Our next meeting will be at Bombay, where I shall hope to be on the arrival of your steamer. From there I shall escort you to my mother's house in Vellore."

"And our Indian wedding?"

She felt the fingers upon hers tighten as he answered:

"As soon after your arrival as is possible."

The moment came for the final parting. He bent over her hand and kissed it.

"Good-bye. Allah preserve you and bless you, dear —wife."

In another second he was gone. The next day he was in Paris, and she was back at Winston.

CHAPTER IV

THE BEGUM

"A strange foot brings evil to a house."—*Indian saying.*

IT was not without a pang of regret that Lorina turned her back on Winston. Eager as she was to feel her wings, she was much attached to her family. But even when it came to the farewells, and she drove for the last time along the familiar road across the marshes to the old Queen Anne town of Beccles, where she took the train, she never once swerved from her determination. The squire said but little; he had accepted the inevitable, and he contented himself with a frequent repetition of advice to come home at once if it was not to her mind. Mrs Carlyon wept copiously. With all her follies she loved her daughters dearly. Amidst lamentations over losing her, she implored Lorina to be careful with her beautiful diamonds, begged her to write every mail, regretted that she had been so obstinate about the lady's-maid, and warned her that now she was a princess she must give up her independence and live according to her rank. Very few words passed between the sisters; their hearts were too full for speech. It was a trying scene, and Lorina was glad when the ordeal was over.

At Bombay she and her companion, Mrs Russel, were met by Mir Yacoob. As her eyes fell upon his familiar form a thrill of pleasure passed through

her. She was surprised at her own emotion. A few curious glances followed her as she stepped into a carriage perfect in every respect as an English turn-out. The distinguished gentleman who accompanied her was not recognised as a "native." He was faultlessly attired in English clothes, and, with his fair Arabian complexion, he did not look like one of the people of the land.

He saw to their comfort with quiet attention, showed them the sights of Bombay, and when they were ready to proceed they found a special train waiting to take them to their destination.

They arrived at Vellore in the morning, at sunrise. A carriage and a dogcart were waiting at the station. Mir Yacoob stepped into the latter, and drove himself. The vehicle which conveyed Lorina and Mrs Russel was very different from that which they had used at Bombay. It belonged to the Begum, and was built to suit her requirements. A drive of four miles brought them to the entrance of park-like grounds. The heavy gates were swung open by the gatekeepers, and in a few minutes more Lorina stood in the doorway of the Begum's house, the harem. The great iron-bound doors, heavier than those which they had just passed, clanged behind them, and shut out the carriage, with its masculine attendants. There was a curious silence in the place—a silence broken by the tinkle of falling water in a fountain close by, and the familiar chirp of sparrows.

Led by Mir Yacoob they entered the house, and passed on to an inner room, which was darkened by deep verandahs. Here they waited in silence, still standing, and Lorina drew closer to her husband. It was neither shyness nor nervousness, but rather intrepidity and pride, which caused her to place herself

at his side. He turned and looked at her with eyes that spoke the welcome which the mother delayed in giving, and she replied with an answering smile. An exclamation from Mrs Russel fell on their ears. The Begum stood before them, robed in folds of the finest white muslin. Lorina met the earnest gaze of a pair of dark penetrating eyes, that scanned her closely with a curiosity that precluded every other feeling. The welcome, if such it could be called, was cold and strange; but she had been warned by Mir Yacoob that his mother was not as hers. A long, thin hand was extended — limp, cold, and nerveless. She shook it, and let it drop; it was as chilling as the Begum's manner.

"You do us an honour in coming so far to see us. I fear that you will find it dull here."

The Mohammedan lady spoke slowly and with some difficulty, as though she were repeating a lesson that she had learnt, as indeed was the case. She had studied English in her youth, under an English governess, but had rarely used it since that lady had left her on her marriage with Mir Yacoob's father.

"Oh no! I am pleased to come and see you. I hope to be very happy here, and to make my home near you."

Lorina spoke warmly, but her words met with no response. It was possible that the Begum did not understand all that she said. Mir Yacoob glanced at his mother, standing silent and impassive before them. He hastened to make up for her shortcomings as a hostess. Saying something in his own tongue, to which she acquiesced with a wave of her hand, he asked Lorina if he might show her the rooms that had been prepared for her. She looked towards the Begum, who, instead of leading the way, bent her



head, turned, and left the room. Lorina's eyes sought her companion's for an explanation. Mir Yacoob hastened to give it.

"My mother leaves me to do the honours. She knows so little of English ways, you must excuse her. This is her drawing-room, which is to be your sitting-room. You must make yourself as happy as you can in it. She would not allow me to alter the furniture. At Hyderabad we will have things very different. Upstairs you will find your bedrooms. Those, I know, will be more to your taste, for I put them in the hands of an European tradesman. Your servants I chose myself. They speak English, and have served in English families. I must leave you now, and will return to-morrow morning."

"Aren't you staying in the same house with us?" asked Lorina, in surprise.

"I have my own house outside the garden walls, with my own staff of servants. Here they are all women."

"And I shall not see you till to-morrow?"

The ring of disappointment in her tone tempted him to brave his mother's displeasure, and break every rule of the harem to stay by her side. But there was sufficient reason not to annoy the Begum unnecessarily.

"To-morrow at ten," he replied.

"Twenty-four hours at least! However, I have plenty to do." Her eyes travelled round the room. May I have some flowers?"

"Certainly. I will give the orders."

"I think you will find a transformation scene when you come back. My reforms shall begin at once."

He laughed as he followed her glance. The apartment was large and airy, and of fine proportions, but it

was not in the least like an English drawing-room. The ceiling was studded with glass chandeliers, not one of which was perfect. Three clumsy round tables stood in a line down the centre of the room. At each were placed four chairs, as though preparation was presently to be made for a dinner party. The ornaments on the tables were a strange collection of rubbish and works of art. There were musical boxes of every description, most of them choked with dust, and not in working order; mechanical toys, several clocks—none of them going—china mugs and bowls, some ornamental ivory combs, a half-dozen hand-glasses, and a dessert service which was grimed with the dust of years.

"You have your work cut out for you, I am afraid," he said, with an amused smile, as he left her.

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It was a little before ten on the following morning, when Lorina, having done justice to an excellent breakfast, looked with longing eyes out into the garden. She was standing on the steps of the verandah, swinging her sun-hat, and idly watching a wagtail which ran along the stone parapet of the fountain.

"Mrs Russel!" she called.

An English lady, in widow's weeds, came out of the sitting-room.

"Yes?"

"I asked Mir Yacoob to let me have some flowers—this was yesterday morning—and none have come in up to the present time.

"You must have patience."

"Patience!" echoed the girl. "Mine is exhausted, and I am going out to cut what I want now."

"The sun is too hot for you; you mustn't go out at this time of the day. Do wait patiently; the gardener will bring them in time."



A fat, sleepy-looking man—one of the eunuchs of the household—came up and salaamed.

"What does the lady ask for?" he said, in Hindustani, to Mrs Russel, who acted as interpreter and munshi as well as chaperone.

"I asked for flowers—flowers," Lorina repeated.

"It is not the custom of the house to bring flowers into it unless for a special occasion," he said.

"You seem to have made an unusual request. I suppose flowers are only used for weddings and that sort of thing," explained Mrs Russel.

"It is my mission to overcome prejudices in this house," said Lorina, as she put on her hat and ran out into the garden, while Mrs Russel looked on in helpless deprecation. With rapid fingers she soon possessed herself of a large handful of magnificent oleander blossoms. "There, now I have what I want. You can go, Cassim; you need not wait."

The unwieldy attendant waddled back to the verandah, where he stood on guard, his stolid face devoid of expression. Mrs Russel, seeing that he waited within sight and sound, repeated Lorina's words in Hindustani. He moved a few steps away from the house, but took up a position under its shadow, which commanded a view of the room.

Lorina carried her flowers to the drawing-room, and gazed round her with something like dismay. Only yesterday she had arranged the room, putting the most incongruous objects away out of sight, and pushing the furniture into less formal groups. But, in spite of orders to the contrary, the things were all back in their old places. With a little grimace of impatience, she made the alteration again, and then gave her attention to her flowers. She brought every available vase into use, including the china mugs and bowls.

"There! isn't that an improvement?" she cried, with pardonable pride.

Mrs Russel expressed her admiration, observing:

"I wonder what the Begum will say."

"I expect she will be pleased. I must have some pots of palms and ferns about the room. When Mir Yacoob comes this morning I will tell him what I want."

She could not help feeling that she was more his guest than his mother's. She had just finished her task when the tall, upright figure of the Begum caught her eye. She went forward to greet her. Close behind came her two daughters, slips of girls, not fully grown. Their white robes fell straight from their shoulders, and were unconfined by any belt. Their skirts, which just cleared the ground, were bordered with handsome gold embroidery. Beautiful pearl ornaments, in strings and tassels, adorned their olive skin. There was an eager look of curiosity and childish wonderment in their large brown eyes as Lorina met her visitors, in European fashion, with outstretched hand.

"Good-morning, Miss Carlyon," said the Begum, in English, her daughters repeating it after her.

When the greetings were over the Mohammedan ladies looked round the room, noting the changes that had been made. Their eyes fell on the oleanders, and they expressed their disapproval. Mrs Russel acted now as interpreter.

"The Begum says your flowers are poisonous."

"Oh no! they can't be," exclaimed Lorina.

She buried her face in the double camelia-like blossoms, and inhaled their almond scent. The colour of her cheek rivalled the tint of their petals. Shahjee, the elder girl, made a remark to her sister, who nodded assent and smiled.



"What is it?" asked Lorina.

Shahjee touched the flowers, and shyly pointed to her cheek.

"Same," she said, in English.

"What a pretty compliment. What am I to say to acknowledge it, Mrs Russel?"

The correct sentence was given in Hindustani. Shahjee and her sister, Noor-i-Chasm, laughed again, and Lorina felt that she had made a good beginning as far as the girls were concerned. With the Begum conversation was much more difficult. In vain Lorina talked, doing her best in the Begum's language, and falling back upon her own when the foreign tongue failed her. She had applied herself to its study under Mrs Russel's tuition, and understood some of the simpler sentences. She had no difficulty in making herself clear, as she had the unsolicited help of a woman, who had followed the Begum into the room and taken up her position behind her chair. Her name was Dowluth, and she possessed the entire confidence of the Begum. She had a better acquaintance with the English language than her superior. Finding it impossible to maintain a conversation any longer, Lorina turned to the girls. She took up a photograph book and showed them the pictures. Mrs Russel described the different scenes. A turn of the page brought St George and his horse to view. Shahjee and her sister gazed at the features of the handsome young Englishman again and again, turning back to the page more than once, much to Lorina's amusement. Dowluth looked on with disapproval, and could scarcely restrain herself. But the Begum gave no sign; for, though she was far behind her son, she was not altogether averse to reform. It was with her consent and approval that her son went to the university, and her daughters



received instruction from an English governess at Hyderabad. The old woman was, therefore, obliged to hold her peace.

Whilst they were thus occupied Mir Yacoob entered. He greeted his mother with an Oriental salutation, and shook hands with Lorina. His sisters used the same salutation to him that he had used to his mother.

"Ah! naughty girls, looking at foreign men's pictures?" he cried, shaking his finger at them.

"They are so interested; I wish I had brought more. They are fascinated with the photographs, and charmed with our tales of England."

"All new and forbidden ground. I congratulate you on having accomplished so much." He glanced round the room with approval. "You have made the place look just a little like Winston with all your flowers," he said.

Her face lit up with pleasure.

"Thank you for your pretty speech. I wish your mother and sisters thought as you do. They complain that I have brought deadly flowers into the house."

"The plant is poisonous, if eaten. There is a superstition that the oleander brings evil on a house if its blossoms are taken into it. The Hindus have a saying that a bad son is like an oleander flower; he brings misfortune upon the house by his wicked deeds."

"Perhaps I may be able to show them how foolish such a superstition is."

She smiled at him with hope and confidence in her face, and saw nothing of the Begum's look. The mother's watchful glance was quick to note the light in her son's eyes when the English girl spoke.

"Come into the verandah; I have two or three things to say," said Lorina, in the old decisive manner he knew so well. She led the way to a sofa at the end of the



wide, pillared verandah, and they sat down. "Will you tell the gardener to bring me flowers every morning? I should like to have them fresh every day."

"Certainly; I was under the impression that they were cut yesterday and this morning. There are quantities in my garden if there are not enough here."

"And I want some pots of palms and ferns."

Mir Yacoob promised them also.

"Anything else?" he asked, leaning back against the silk cushions in evident enjoyment, and watching the golden tints in her brown hair.

"Yes; there is something else. You must give an order to the guard at the harem door that he is to allow me to pass in and out as I please."

"Has he refused to let you pass?"

"Last evening I wished to go for a walk with Mrs Russel in the grounds of your house, and he refused to open the gate."

Mir Yacoob roused himself with an expression of surprise, and said:

"I thought you were going for a drive in the open carriage which I sent for your use."

"Your mother's closed carriage came round. It was a still, hot evening, so I sent it back to the stables."

Mir Yacoob rose from his seat. His sisters were absorbed in the photographs which Mrs Russel continued to describe, and the Begum sat near them. She appeared to be listening to Mrs Russel, but her eyes as well as Dowluth's were fastened on her son. He approached and spoke to her. She made a reply, and he returned to Lorina.

"My mother tells me that the open carriage has had the pole damaged, and that it is unsafe. She had only the closed carriage to offer you. I ordered a landau

from Madras for your special use, but unfortunately it was broken in transit."

"Have you no other conveyances?"

"I have my own dogcart."

"Then take me for a drive this evening. I want to see the English cantonments. It is five miles from here, I understand."

"I shall be delighted. What time will you be ready?"

"At half-past four. Won't you come in and have some tea with me before we start?"

"I am afraid I can't do that, much as I should like it. It would shock my mother. As it is, she doesn't understand our freedom of speech. A Mohammedan lady, when she is 'nisbuth,' or betrothed, is not allowed even then to see the man or to speak to him."

"How very unsatisfactory."

"My sister Shahjee is betrothed to a friend of the family, but she has never seen him."

"She must envy me my liberty."

"I don't think she does. She would be terrified if I were to propose to introduce him to her before the wedding."

"Doesn't he want to see her?"

"No; he is content to wait. If she broke her gosha he would probably refuse to marry her. I have known a man divorce his wife for breaking her gosha."

Lorina heard a slight movement behind the doorway nearest to the corner where they were seated. She got up quickly and went into the room. Dowluth was just within the doorway. There could be but one object for her presence there.

"Go back to the Begum," said Lorina, in a low voice.

She returned to the sofa, and her eye caught a glimpse of Cassim standing outside amongst the pots in such a position that he could see them without attracting atten-



ion. She laughed as she sat down again. "We are watched on all sides," she said. "You don't mind it, apparently?"

"I have been used to it all my life," he replied, indifferently. "It is the custom of the country. Every householder, be he Anglo-Indian or native, is subject to the same espionage, though he may not know it."

"I suppose it is curiosity."

"They wouldn't admit that; they would try to persuade you that it arose simply from a desire to fulfil your wishes at the instant. If I were to call, you would see servants running from all directions to do my bidding. I am not going to make the experiment," he continued, with an amused smile at the expression on her face. "The only person I want to see just now is yourself."

His manner was courteous, but his tone indicated something else, and brought the colour to her cheek. The Begum bit her lip. The fairest of Islam's daughters could not show roses in her face. The tinge of carmine which her son had learnt to love belonged only to the women of the West. Presently he asked if she had any more requests to make. Lorina assured him that she had mentioned everything.

"Is the food as you like it?"

"It is excellent. A woman brings it; she is always the same, and she is most attentive."

There was a pause. Mir Yacoob was content to sit in silence by her side, and might have lingered on for some time; but his mother made a move, looking with expectancy towards him.

"I am afraid I must leave you now. I wish we were in your mother's drawing-room at Winston. However it is not to be for long, is it? When may I fix the day for the Mohammedan ceremony?"

"As soon as you wish. Whether I stay here a day or a year, my decision is made, and I shall not change my mind."

He rose reluctantly, took her hand, and held it regardless of the eyes that watched.

"I suppose I must be patient," he said, placing a strong restraint upon himself. She seemed farther from him now than she had ever been in her own home. He chafed at the trammels of his mother's presence. No one knew better than he did how bitterly she resented the introduction of the foreigner into the family.

"Yes; I fancy we shall need a good deal of patience in our lives with the task before us," she replied.

They returned to the sitting-room. Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm came to Lorina with entreaties that she would teach them embroidery with some silks that Mrs Russel had produced. They were most eager to learn any kind of fancy-work that she could show them. Her attention being taken up by the girls, the mother seized the opportunity of securing her son to herself.

"Come to my room, if you have finished with her."

She glanced at Lorina with a contemptuous curl of the lip, which did not escape Mir Yacoob, and walked from the room without bidding her guests farewell. Dowluth followed mother and son. They turned down a long corridor, and mounted a stone staircase that led into the upper storey of the right wing, where the Begum had her apartments. The centre of the house was occupied by the English ladies. On the ground-floor were their dining and drawing-rooms. Above were the bedrooms, dressing, and bathrooms. On the left was another wing corresponding with that occupied by the Begum. Here Dowluth reigned supreme over the numerous female attendants of the harem.

The Begum's sitting-room was very different from



the one which they had just left. The windows were partially darkened with venetians, and the atmosphere was heavy with the scent of sandal-wood. The walls were painted with arabesque designs, rich in gold and colour. One or two low tables and a few easy-chairs were placed about the room; but the most noticeable feature was the number of variously tinted cushions disposed upon the floor. They were of all sizes and shapes, from the large, square pillow of down to the hard, round bolster. Rugs of the finest texture were strewn about, and here and there was tossed a satin coverlet embroidered all over with delicate shades of floss silk. The room might have been a hall in the palace of sleep, so complete was its repose.

The Begum threw herself down on a group of cushions at the upper end, whilst two handsome dark-complexioned girls arranged the bolsters and pillows to her liking. Mir Yacoob refused his mother's invitation to follow her example, and took one of the low chairs. The girls, at a sign from Dowluth, darted forward to assist, but he motioned them away with a gesture of impatience. They glanced at Dowluth, and one of them fetched a palm-leaf fan. Following the silent directions given by the old woman, the girl began to fan the Begum gently. She placed herself in such a position that the prince's eyes must rest upon her unless he turned deliberately away. A look of annoyance crossed his face.

"Are you so warm that you must be fanned?" he asked.

The Begum told the girl to go.

"Do you want Dowluth here? I have much to say that is only for your ear."

"You know, my son, that I keep nothing from her. All my life, ever since your father gave her to me, she

has been as a sister, and I have been a mother to her son."

"I know, I know. Where is he now?"

"At Delhi; he wished to see the world, and so I gave him permission, as I gave you, to travel. Dowluth, leave us; my son would speak with me."

"The Beebee's son is as my son," murmured the old woman, as she salaamed low and moved to the entrance of the room. The slave-girls followed her. The moment they were gone Mir Yacoob's manner changed. His self-restraint vanished. He leaned forward towards his mother with outstretched hands.

"Mother! mother!" he cried, in tones that cut her to the heart. "You have seen her! Is she not beautiful? Is she not all that the heart of man could desire? And she is as good as she is beautiful. Now—now you will consent to give her the shahdee to make her my honoured wife?"

But the Begum remained silent, and resolutely turned her face away from those pleading eyes. With fiery words he urged, he begged her to receive the girl he had chosen. As he spoke her maternal soul was torn with conflicting emotions. She loved her son; he was her only boy. It was hard to refuse what he desired so earnestly. But pride of race upheld her and made her obdurate. Because he was so dear, and because he was her only son, so much the greater reason that she should preserve his dignity and save him from an act of folly.

"My son," she cried, in anguish, tears streaming down her cheeks, "you ask what is impossible."

"Nothing is impossible to a man of my race," he replied, proudly.

"An infidel!" she cried, in a tone of pain that reached the listening ear of Dowluth as she stood just outside the open door.



"Ay, but a very queen; and I would bestow on her the shahdee. She is worthy of the highest honour we can give her."

The Begum clasped her long thin hands.

"My son, give me time. You ask a hard thing of me."

"Not so hard but that it can be done."

"I will give my consent to the nikah marriage."

"It is not enough."

How like he was to his father as he spoke: the autocrat who had ruled her life with a rod of iron until his death! Her courage failed her as she looked at him; but she did not give up the struggle.

"You are making a marriage of your own free will and for your own pleasure. It should be enough that I consent. My presence is not necessary."

"But I say that it is. Who amongst my nation will honour her unless she is joined to me with the shahdee? I must have your presence as well as your consent, and my sisters must take their part in the ceremony."

"This is only given when the mother chooses the bride," persisted the lady, with an obstinacy that was well nigh as great as her son's.

"My choice should be your choice. You sent me to England. You allowed me to look into Paradise, and now you deny me entrance there. You are cruel, cruel! I must—I will have the shahdee."

"He should be strong, indeed, who dictates to a parent," she responded, in a sharp tone.

She looked towards the door where Dowluth still watched. The woman came in at once, and was followed by the slave-girls. One of them carried a tray of sweetmeats. She knelt before the prince and presented them to him. He motioned her away impatiently, and she offered the dish to her mistress in

the same humble attitude, a position that displayed the rounded beauties of her perfect figure. The Begum kept her there as she toyed with the sweets, choosing daintily.

"I recommend these sweets. They are excellent. Try them," she said.

As she spoke her eyes rested on the beautiful dish-bearer, and not upon the sweets. He understood what she meant.

"They are not to my mind," he replied, shortly. "I long for others of a different make."

"The sweetmeats made by infidels are poisonous to the true Mussulman. Surely we can find you variety enough to please you. Try one of these to please me. They were ever good enough for your father, may the Prophet keep his soul in peace!"

The girl handed the dish to him again, looking up into his eyes as she did so. He helped himself to a small piece.

"It is excellent, but I have no appetite."

They talked of other matters, the gift of alms to the poor, and Shahjee's marriage. Mir Yacoob rose to go.

"My desires must be fulfilled in this matter; I will take no refusal."

He spoke imperiously, in his father's voice, and the Begum trembled as she listened. Her heart sank within her as he continued:

"If you remain obstinate, there is one other course to pursue. If you compel me to take that, you will lose your son."

She made no reply, and in another moment he had left her. No sooner had his footsteps died away than she rose from her pillows, and called for Dowluth. She was close at hand, and came kneeling by her side.

"Oh, curse the infidel woman with her fair devil's



face! She has bewitched my son. Oh, that she was dead! dead!"

She buried her face in her cushions, and wept aloud. Dowluth wept with her. Every word that she uttered in her abandonment of wrath pierced the heart of her faithful retainer, and awoke responsive passions.

Mir Yacoob lived in a large house close to the harem, from which it was divided by a high wall. There was a gateway in the wall, and the gate—a heavy armoured door, through which Lorina passed on her arrival—was closely guarded by two strong women and one of those fat black creatures in male attire, whose position puzzled the English girl. She could not discover whether they were menservants or officers of a higher standing. They obeyed the orders of Mir Yacoob and the Begum with slavish obedience, but they carried themselves with an independent bearing towards the rest of the household which bordered on insolence. Cassim was at the head of the band, which included gardeners and watermen, as well as the man at the gate.

As the prince went towards the door he called Cassim, and gave the order to the guard in his presence which was to ensure the freedom of the English ladies.

"The guard has received a command from the Begum not to allow the ladies to pass, Huzoor," said Cassim, making a low salaam.

Mir Yacoob turned on him with a sudden wrath that made the man tremble.

"Who commands here?"

Both the men prostrated themselves.

"Huzoor, you are the Shahzada here," they cried, with one voice.

"Then see that my commands are obeyed."

He strode through the great doorway; and the two women who opened it bent low before him as he passed.

Lorina's power was making itself felt, though she did not know it. Here was an evidence of it, and the news spread rapidly through the whole establishment: an order of the Beebee—this was the household name for their mistress—had been countermanded, and two of the ladies were to be allowed to pass in and out of the harem at their pleasure. It was an unheard-of thing. The Shahzada (prince) must have lost his wits in the foreign country where he stayed so long. Dowluth, on her way to the drawing-room to escort Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm to their rooms, was told the news, and ground her teeth with rage.

"It is an insult to the Beebee!" she cried.

Cassim shrugged his shoulders. The prince was more to him than the Begum.

"The sahib is master. He is like his late father—may Allah bless his grave!—against whom no one could stand."

"May Shaitan have the infidel woman for his own!" muttered Dowluth, as she crept towards the sitting-room. She did not enter at once, but took up a position behind the doorway, whence she could see the occupants. Lorina and the two girls were deeply absorbed in the mysteries of embroidery. Mrs Russel was seated in a low chair, with a book on her knee, from which she lifted her eyes and caught sight of white drapery.

"Why do you wait there?" asked Mrs Russel, in Hindustani.

"The Beebee ordered me to call Shahjee Bee and Noor-i-Chasm Bee to their room."

"Then do so. You watch the English lady too closely; she does not like it."

"She is a foreigner," replied the woman, sulkily. "If she comes amongst us she must put up with our ways."



"You forget that she will soon be the wife of the prince. Her word with him is already law; and those whom she does not like will be removed."

There was a covert threat in Mrs Russel's words, as well as a truth which Dowluth had but just felt when she talked with Cassim. Her eyes flashed angrily.

"She will never be his wife in our eyes," she replied, defiantly.

"Is it usually a young woman or an old one who rules a young man? Sons grow beyond the control of mothers when love touches their hearts. Where is your own son now? Is he yours or his wife's?"

She spoke at a venture, but her words went home. She knew the East well. When was ever an Oriental mother satisfied with her son's wife? Without deigning to reply to this home-thrust, Dowluth entered the room and summoned the girls.

When they were gone Lorina closed the photograph books and folded the silks. She was not in a humour for fancy-work by herself, and she sat idly looking out into the dazzling sunshine. Her life in England had been spent out-of-doors as much as possible. The enforced imprisonment within the house on account of the sun irritated her. She could not settle to any indoor occupation such as she employed herself with on wet days at home. Her limbs became fidgetty with inaction; she wanted to go out walking or riding. She rose from her chair, and began to pace the room. Mrs Russel watched her uneasily.

"I can't stand much of this sort of life, Mrs Russel," she said presently. "I have seen quite enough of the family to know all about them. As Mir Yacoob's wife I shall be able to twist them round my fingers. If it were not for this tiresome Mohammedan ceremony, I would be off to Hyderabad to-morrow. The house is

all ready, and some good servants have been engaged. This delay is irksome and unnecessary, now that I have seen my husband's people."

The elder lady looked up at her with a shade of anxiety on her face as she replied:

"But the ceremony is an absolute necessity."

"Oh yes, of course; I quite understand that it cannot be dispensed with, if I am to live in this country. But I feel that I am already Mir Yacoob's wife, bound to him by ties far stronger than any he can tie here; and I am impatient to be recognised as such. As soon as I am my own mistress I will put an end to all this spying and prying. Look at that woman outside. She has just taken Cassim's place whilst he goes to his dinner. She stands there to report on our doings."

"It is of no use chafing against the ways and customs of the harem," said Mrs Russel, with a sigh.

She had no desire to be a reformer, or to interfere with the life in a Mohammedan gentleman's harem. She knew better than Lorina that the harem was a separate little world, completely severed from the world outside its walls. The laws that governed it were unwritten; but they were none the less despotic. If interference and opposition disturbed the inmates, they had their own methods of restoring order. Conservatism reigned supreme. The system was beyond anything of the kind the English mind could conceive. Small wonder was it that the elder lady regarded the younger with something like anxiety.

At half-past four Lorina presented herself at the gate, which this time was opened at her request without delay. A carriage stood before it; but it was not Mir Yacoob's dogcart. It was the Begum's family coach, in which Lorina had been driven from the station —a large old-fashioned vehicle, shuttered with venetians.

There was no way of lifting up the shutters, though the venetians themselves opened. The occupants of the carriage could see out if they chose, whilst they could not be seen themselves. It was a kind of conveyance commonly used by the gosha ladies of the harem. To a girl of Lorina's temperament it was purgatory to ride in such a carriage. As she was gazing at it with disgust, Mir Yacoob came up. She had never seen him with such a look of wrath upon his face as he wore now. His words, however, were temperate to gentleness.

"I am sorry to say the tire has come off the wheel of my dogcart, and I am not able to fulfil my promise."

Lorina laughed, in spite of her vexation. The means taken to preserve the dignity of the harem were simple but effective.

"We did not keep our intention secret enough. Next time we must be more careful."

But Mir Yacoob was not inclined to make light of it.

"I am very much annoyed—more than I can tell you. Now what will you do? Will you drive in this carriage? It is better than staying indoors."

To please him more than to please herself she assented to his proposition.

"But I don't care to go alone," she added.

"My sisters would like to drive with you, I am sure. I will ask my mother to allow them to come."

He returned some minutes later, bringing Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm. The only addition they had made to their dress was a piece of muslin, which was thrown over the head, and could be drawn across the face so as to hide it if necessary. The women at the gate held up dark-blue sheets to screen the ladies from the eyes of the syces and coachman, and the door of the carriage was closed.

"Where would you like to go?" asked Mir Yacoob through the venetians.

"Round by the English station, and home by some pretty country road," replied Lorina.

He gave the order, and watched the heavy carriage swing out of the gates of the park in which his house and harem were situated. The frown on his handsome face returned. He had looked forward to the evening drive, and his disappointment was far greater than Lorina's. Moreover, he was not a man who could bear opposition with equanimity. Master of more money than he needed, of servants and followers, of a palace fit for a reigning prince at Hyderabad, he was being checked and thwarted on all sides like a schoolboy. He felt it the more when he remembered whose hand it was that wrought the trouble.

The carriage bowled swiftly along the smooth roads. Lorina caught glimpses of wayside villages; of mud huts with picturesque roofs of palm-leaf; of wells where girls in bright-coloured cloths drew water to cook their evening meal. She could distinguish patches of green cultivation and palm groves. In the distance the stretches of the river gleamed yellow with golden sand instead of blue with water. The rains were late, and the country was still parched, except where there was artificial irrigation. Kylassa, one of the rocky hills of Vellore, stood sentinel over river and rice-patch. Lorina looked at its crown with longing eyes, as she thought of a climb up its steep sides. Nearer stood the old fort with its deserted barracks and desecrated Hindu temple. Presently they passed some handsome houses surrounded by trees. These Lorina took to be the residences of the English, but the horses went too fast to allow her to see much detail through the venetians.



They reached a shady road where the branches of the trees met overhead. Long-tailed parrots, green as the leaves about which they played, screamed above them, quarrelling over the red berries of the ficus. Bold jays, bluer than the skies above, golden orioles, sun-loving and vain, chattering minas, and fidgety little bee-eaters, were all taking their share in the feast of fruit and insect provided by nature.

"I shall stop the carriage, and get out; a walk will do me good," said Lorina.

Her companions at first only half-understood what she meant. To stop the carriage when they were out driving was an unheard-of proceeding. Lorina called to the coachman in Hindustani, and the horses were pulled up sharply. The syce came to the venetians to know what was wanted.

"Open, open!" she cried, with something of the prince's imperiousness.

Shahjee and her sister instantly enveloped their faces in their muslin draperies. After a brief moment's hesitation the syce obeyed the order and opened the door. With a cry of delight she jumped out of the carriage, and was free. She gazed about her with a feeling of intense relief and delight. Although she had been so short a time in the harem, her imprisonment was already almost unendurable. The syce closed the carriage-door immediately, and spoke hurriedly to the coachman. The men were startled by her action, and not a little alarmed. They were responsible to the Begum, in a measure, and were puzzled to know what was to be done under the circumstance.

Taking no notice of them, Lorina stepped out along the road, looking to right and left, and drinking in the beauties of the Indian landscape, as it lay bathed in

the glory of the sunset light. The rumble of wheels behind made her turn. A second closed carriage approached rapidly and stopped. The door opened, and Cassim got out. She stamped her foot with vexation. Not even a drive in the country could be undertaken without a watch being put upon her. The laughter of the girls inside the carriage ceased when they recognised Cassim's voice, and Shahjee, peeping through the venetians, implored her to return. But Lorina's temper was ruffled. She was not going to be browbeaten and bullied. She continued walking along the road, Cassim following at a short distance, and she smiled to herself as she quickened her pace.

"I will be even with the old wretch, and lead him a pretty dance," she said to herself.

But as she said it, Cassim made a sign to the coachman of the first carriage. Presently the horses began to fidget as though they chafed at the slow pace. They were beautiful animals, little accustomed to have to walk, and they were easily irritated into fretting at the curb. From fidgeting they proceeded to prancing and plunging. Lorina was inclined to let them plunge and do their worst; but she was compelled at last to listen to the cries of alarm that came from the carriage. She could not shut her ears any longer to the pleadings of the girls as they begged her to get in again.

"Checkmated once more," she said to herself, as she stopped and turned towards the family coach.

The door was quickly opened, she stepped in, and the horses dashed off at breakneck speed. Through the country roads they flew, Cassim rumbling in their rear. As they passed through the villages the fleet-footed syces ran on in front, shouting to the women and children to clear the road and make room for the Begum's carriage. Where the road was clear the men



caught the leather straps at the back and swung themselves on to the footboard again. It was almost dark when Lorina and her companions arrived at the harem door. There was the same odd little ceremony with the sheets as the girls re-entered, a ceremony they were as anxious to have properly performed as their attendants. Then the thick mailed door closed, and Lorina felt the walls of her prison round her once more.

"Would you believe it! that old wretch Cassim followed on our tracks during the drive this evening," said Lorina, as she sat down to dinner with Mrs Russel.

She described the incidents with a touch of humour—Cassim's unwonted exercise, and her own defeat.

"They have a trick of coercing one without resorting to physical force, which is clever. When I heard those dear children scream—I can't call them anything else but children—I got into the carriage like a lamb, and Cassim was triumphant."

"I fancy the harem never had such a rebellious member as it finds in you," replied Mrs Russel, with a smile.

"I wish they would leave me alone and not trouble themselves about me. Dowluth and Cassim are the two I object to most. They shall never enter my house. I found Dowluth in my dressing-room this evening when I came in from my drive."

"What was she doing?"

"At the moment she was hammering—that word exactly describes it—hammering one of the under-servants who attends to us. She is the water-woman, I think, but there are so many of them it is difficult to say what their respective duties are. Dowluth had her fist clenched, and she was thumping the poor soul—pounding her to a jelly. I tried to find out what

was wrong, but the girl couldn't speak for crying, and Dowluth wouldn't explain. What position does Dowluth hold in the house?"

Mrs Russel did not reply to the question. Lorina continued:

"She seems to rule the whole household. Is she the housekeeper?"

"There is no such thing as a housekeeper in these Indian households."

"Is she a servant?"

"No; she wouldn't call herself that."

"She is not governess to the girls?"

"No."

"Yet her word with them is law."

"I believe she is the Begum's handmaid," said Mrs Russel, at length, finding that Lorina was not to be put off any longer.

The girl made no reply. She was not a deep student of the Old Testament, and the word conveyed nothing more to her mind than the term "confidential maid" would have done. Mrs Russel was relieved to find that her curiosity was satisfied. There were many things in the harem which were difficult of explanation, especially to an English girl, whose knowledge of Eastern nations and their ways was absolutely nil. The widow did not consider it part of her duty to impart everything she knew. There would be time enough for Lorina to learn unsavoury details when it became necessary that she should know them. She hoped earnestly that the time would never come when she would have to face the inner hidden life of the Mussulman harem.



CHAPTER V

THE HAUNTED WELL

"To the timid the world is full of demons."—*Tamil proverb.*

THE days passed with a monotony which the English girl had never before experienced. The wedding for some reason or other, was delayed. Mir Yacoob gave no explanation, but from the gloom that occasionally overcast his face, Lorina suspected opposition on the part of the Begum. In spite of that lady's efforts to control her feelings, she could not hide her antipathy to her daughter-in-law. Mrs Russel suggested that perhaps they were waiting for a propitious day; so much importance was attached, she explained, to the choice of a lucky hour.

The pleasantest hours of the day were between six and nine in the morning. During that time she was able to roam about the garden as she liked. She hoped that those early hours might be passed in the saddle; but there had been the usual opposition, which Mir Yacoob had vainly tried to surmount. The first horse fell lame; a second horse was suddenly taken ill; a third developed a sore back. Mir Yacoob was furious, but he could do nothing; his mother was too strong for him. Lorina submitted to her fate, and asked him not to trouble any further; she was content to wait till they went to Hyderabad, where there would be no difficulties. So she consoled herself with the garden. It was large, and a considerable portion of it was

shaded by beautiful tamarind and mango-trees. Under the shade of one of these her early morning tea was spread.

Here she was joined by another member of the household, whom she never saw at any other time of the day. This was a young matron named Lalbee, of about twenty-three years of age, who had two little girls. She was the wife of a near relative of the house, and during her husband's absence she lived under the Begum's protection. Every morning the young mother brought her children into the garden to play. They soon lost their shyness, and became excellent friends with the tall English lady. Lalbee looked on as they romped and played in their gentle way, her beautiful face beaming with delight and gratitude for the notice taken of her and her children.

The little maidens were accompanied by some dark-complexioned children between the age of nine and twelve. They were dressed in coloured petticoats and jackets, after the fashion of Hindus. They acted as companions to Lalbee's daughters, and, with one exception, they seemed quite as happy and as well cared for as their charges. This one did not appear to be as contented as the others: her laugh was slower in coming, and there was a droop about the corners of the full mouth which betrayed an occasional sadness.

Lorina asked one morning about her, but it was not easy to gather any definite information. As soon as she showed a desire to know anything, the inmates of the harem tried to hide the facts, no matter how simple they were. The children were slaves, and the melancholy little one was the latest purchase. It appeared that most of the lower servants had been taken into the Begum's service under the same conditions; they were virtually slaves, though they held the position and



possessed the privileges of servants. The Begum clothed and fed them far better than they would have been clothed and fed in their own villages. She also married them, if they desired it. The system had its advantages, but it also had its abuses.

Slavery was abolished in British territory in the first half of the nineteenth century, and it is not recognised as existing at the present time. Indeed, it would be difficult to prove its existence in the harem, as there is no market for the traffic in human flesh. The arrangement is exceedingly simple. The village mother, in a season of scarcity, takes one or two of the many little ones clamouring about her feet, whose mouths she cannot fill, to the big house. She prostrates herself before the agent of the big sahib, and begs that her children may be received. If they are strong and well-favoured they are accepted. The mother receives a present, and returns to her family, happy in the thought that these two will escape privation in the coming scarcity. The girls—they are usually girls who are thus disposed of—grow up into fine, comely young women, and make excellent servants. They are not kept gosha, and in many respects they have much greater freedom than their mistresses.

"After all, slavery is not so bad as it sounds, if this is what it means," said Lorina to herself, as she watched the children at play one morning, and noted the care which the small slaves bestowed on their companions.

This morning there had been the same romping in the garden, and the children had been refreshed with fruit and milk from Lorina's breakfast-table. All too soon the ayahs appeared, and the party trooped off to their private rooms, promising to come early the next day. They had finished their play at a favourite spot. It was at the edge of a large square well of clear, limpid,

speaking the language of her husb
knew enough English to make
possible, and where difficulties oc
Russel was sought.

That lady was not an early rise
Indian notions. She preferred to
own room, and she generally app
eight, half-an-hour before breakfas
joined Lorina and Lalbee by the t
the middle of a long tale, which she
of Hindustani and broken English.
best to relate the legend of the well.

There were steps down to the wa
ceptionally low, and the opening to
exposed at the bottom of the stairs.
seldom entirely visible; it was usua
line, submerged in such a way that
trate its depths. This season the rai
the water had shrunk below the lev
it was possible to follow it up.
chamber, where jewels were said t
flow of water was regulated by slui
a couple of windlasses near the tar
them out to Lorina. This



flight was necessary, the harem could be gained, and the fugitive might escape unseen from one of the servants' exits. Pursuit through the passage could be checked by flooding it from another tank.

Lalbee also pointed out a curious conical erection close to the boundary wall; this was the ventilating shaft of the chamber. Lorina asked if anyone had ever been down to look for the jewels. Her companion made a little gesture of horror at the mere thought of such a thing.

"No one has ever been so bold. Evil spirits, big jins, with bad tempers and eyes as large as cart-wheels, live down there guarding treasure."

"And has no one ever braved them?"

"Ah! yes; once, only once, and she was lost. It was a slave-girl, and Dowluth beat her for her laziness and disobedience. She escaped into the garden, and fled down the steps. The opening to the passage was half-exposed; she plunged into the water to drown herself, and the genii drew her down the passage."

"What became of her?"

"She was caught by a jin, who carried her off to the jewel-chamber and made her his wife. After rain we can hear her cries coming faintly up the ventilator."

"Why does she cry?" asked Lorina, amused by the other's simple belief in the legend.

"Because she is frightened, and thinks she will be drowned. But the jin will never let her die; though it would be happier for her if she could do so. The water-women say that they have seen her standing at the bottom of the steps."

"If she can get as far as that, why doesn't she come back to the house?" asked the practical English girl.

"Ah!" cried Lalbee, in a shocked voice. "Can a wife disobey her husband? Surely he would divorce

her, and that would bring shame upon her, and sorrow as well. The jin told her to return, and therefore she was obliged to go back."

"Is it so necessary, then, to obey when the husband speaks?"

Lalbee's eyes turned in wonder upon Lorina as she replied:

"Yes; certainly. Is it not so in your country?"

"Husbands are not allowed to treat their wives badly and shut them up in dark rooms in my country."

Lalbee sighed, and there had crept into her tone a sadness which struck upon Lorina's ear, and drew her attention from the story of the well to the unknown story of the speaker.

"Now, tell me about yourself," she said, passing her arm round the young matron's waist, and leading her from the well, whilst Mrs Russel strolled towards the house. "When were you married?"

"I was married before I was fifteen, which is young for the followers of the Prophet."

"Where?"

"At Hyderabad. The Begum, who has been as a father and mother to me since I was six years old, made the marriage and gave me to my husband."

"And who is he?"

"He is one of the family."

"And is he still alive?"

"Yes; but he has left me because I am in disgrace. Allah gave me daughters instead of sons; and it is necessary that he should seek another wife that he may have a son to bear his name."

As Lorina listened her soul burned with indignation. It was a monstrous injustice!

"Was he good to you when you were first married?"



"Yes; so good and kind! And oh! how I loved him! He was so handsome, so strong and brave!"

Her eyes grew moist and luminous as she thought of the time when she was a proud and happy bride.

"You poor little woman! don't cry. It will all come right in time. My husband and I will set matters straight. Mir Yacoob must write to him and tell him to return. Wait till I go to Hyderabad. You shall come and stay with me there, and we will bring you two together again."

Lorina kissed her, and Lalbee clung to her for one brief moment.

"Ah! how good you are! Will you always love me as a sister?"

"Always! always!" replied the English girl.

It was worth all the annoyance and vexation she had experienced in the Begum's house to feel that she had won her way to the heart of one, at least, of these shy daughters of the East. Lalbee dried her eyes, removing all traces of tears before she returned to the house. She also withdrew from the encircling arm of her companion. Close and sudden friendships were looked upon with suspicion in the harem.

After breakfast Lorina received a visit from the Begum and her daughters. The girls were full of excitement. They had arranged a doll's wedding, and they asked Lorina if she would come to their rooms to see it. She looked at Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm with some surprise. Though they were simple-minded, and only half-educated, they were surely too old for dolls.

"You play with dolls still?" was her reply.

They were not in the least disconcerted. Oh yes; the whole harem played with dolls sometimes.

"How many have you?"

"Only two; the bride and bridegroom. The rest of

and do you both take a part, too?

"We are the bridegroom's sisters. before the bride. Ah! you will laugh The bridegroom will pray and beseec and let him have but a single glance at he will throw flowers and sweets and ri the bride's lap," said Shahjee.

"And all the time," continued Noo shall be telling him how fair she is! wha she has! was ever a man so fortunate! him. Oh! it is such fun! You must co

Lorina promised, willingly enough.

"What part does Lalbee take?"

"Ah! poor Lalbee! The Beebee says keep herself gosha. We have asked come, and it will not be fitting that she sh

"But why? Is she not one of the fami

Again there was the reticence that observed. The two girls looked at thei sat passively by, listening to the conver attempting to join in. As the Begum to explain, Lorina turned their attenti subject. It was no concern of hers a Lalbee was treated, but she made a m she would champion her cause [illegible]



"Something is wrong; what is it?" she asked, in the imperative manner which always seemed to raise her to a queenly level in his eyes.

In reply he went directly to the point, in her own straightforward fashion.

"Do you wish to know the European ladies of the cantonment of Vellore?"

"Yes; most certainly, if they will call upon me," she answered, leading him away from the little family group to obtain more privacy. The thought of seeing a country-woman sent a sudden thrill of pleasure through her.

"One lady has already called," he said, dropping his voice, for he heard the soft swish of drapery in the room, and knew that Dowluth had crept as close as she dared, to listen.

"Has she?" exclaimed Lorina, as she took the seat he offered.

"It was two days ago, about mid-day, at the usual time the English out here pay their visits."

"I was in this room at that time, but nothing was said to me of a visitor."

"You were not told?"

"Certainly not."

"And you, therefore, sent no message?"

Lorina assured him that she had heard nothing of the call, and had sent no message. He sighed as he drew his chair yet nearer to hers.

"These are some of the difficulties with which we have to contend. Mr Cunliffe, the collector, called, with his wife, and they were told that you did not wish to see them; that you did not wish to see any Europeans."

"How provoking! how very——"

He raised a warning hand, and she lowered her voice, leaning towards him that he might hear. The action

[illegible] behind the Begum's chair.

"Mr Cunliffe's visit was purpos
Such a step could not have been
knowledge and consent of my moth

"How did you find out that he h

"He wrote to me saying that he
called. Not only had they been dei
they were also told that the Engli
here did not wish to receive any v
to know from me if this is actually t

Lorina repressed the words which
prompted. She was beginning to un
was necessary to meet the Begum, or
minister Dowluth, with the same syste
had been adopted towards herself. But
was transient. She looked at him a
silent amusement as a thought crosse

"What would you say if I asked yc
me, now—at once, and return the vis
with a heightening of the warm tin
which did not escape his appreciative

"I should like it of all things;
managed?" he replied, promptly.

"We are more likely to succeed in
ment of our wishes if —



"Then stay here till I come back, and their suspicions will not be aroused," she said, rising quietly from her seat and leaving the room. Before Dowluth had time to scent danger, Lorina was back again. She addressed Mrs Russel.

"I am going out with Mir Yacoob. I shall return in time for lunch."

The widow stared at her in astonishment, and was about to ask questions, when Lorina whispered:

"It is all right. The prince is taking me to call on Mr Cunliffe and his wife." She turned to the girls. "Good-bye, Shahjee, for the present. I will come to your doll's wedding to-morrow morning with pleasure."

She bowed to the Begum, who was speechless with amazement, and, without waiting for comment or reply, she walked briskly towards the harem gate. Mir Yacoob followed her, and his mother saw the door close upon them both. At the entrance to the prince's house they were received by two or three peons in handsome uniforms, who bowed low with the usual salutation. They passed on, and Lorina found herself in a fine drawing-room, worthy in every way of one of the best houses in her own country.

"Will you wait here a few minutes whilst I make a change suitable for calling?"

He was not long away, and immediately after his return a brougham drawn by a single horse drove up. The front of the carriage was so arranged that it could be raised entirely, giving it the character of a half-opened landau. Lorina stepped in, and the prince followed her.

"I feel like a conspirator," she said, with a merry laugh.

She was enjoying the escapade more than a little, and the thought of the Begum's astonishment added

—ent — a fact that he might v
what has happened."

He did not tell her that the
more than a mere social inquir
wished to receive visitors. Mr
there might be some mistake in
was given. In any case, he wishe
interview with the lady.

"I am pleased to go in this v
manage it in any other," replied L

"The collector does not forg
Mohammedan," continued Mir Yac
rankling in his mind. "But, afte
You must not forget it either, Lorin
me to do my duty to my mother,
makes it very difficult for me. But
your English freedom. I cannot al
off from your own people, however
may desire it."

He spoke with an earnestness that b

"She does what is right, according
said Lorina, her generosity promp
excuses for the Begum to her son.

"Exactly so; and if you were a
I should acquiesce in all"



to look for covert opposition everywhere. It is most demoralising, for it encourages intrigue, and adds a new excitement to one's actions. We have been obliged to stoop to something of the sort this morning to make sure of effecting our designs, and I confess that I am enjoying it immensely."

He could not help being carried away by her joyousness, and laughed too; but he regarded the matter none the less seriously. Hitherto he had been supremely indifferent to the petty trivialities of the harem. Seen now through the eyes of the English girl they struck him in a new light, as being mean and contemptible. They put him to shame. His merriment died away as he replied, with pathetic seriousness:

"It is, as you say, most demoralising. It is due to inherent conservatism. Conservatism is the keynote of our religion, and any innovation, secular or otherwise, is considered a sin. If it were not for this teaching there would be no difficulty in effecting reforms. It is this bigoted conservatism which makes me despair sometimes of doing any good. I am not the only Mohammedan who feels this. I have friends in Hyderabad holding important positions, politically as well as socially, who are extremely anxious to introduce any social reforms that are consistent with orthodoxy. As I told you in England—and now you see it yourself in my family—it is the ladies themselves who are the chief opposers, and who have, so far, obstructed progress. My mother is considered one of the most advanced in Hyderabad!"

The collector's house was the largest in the station. It stood in spacious grounds which had two entrances. Neither of these was barred by a gate, and, what in Lorina's eyes was better still, there was no guard, as in

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the case of the Begum's grounds. The carriage drew up under a handsome porch, which jutted out from a wide verandah. Foliage plants were grouped in profusion round the massive white columns supporting the terraced roof. One end of the verandah was enclosed in trellis-work to form a fernery; and Lorina caught a glimpse of delicate maidenhair fronds and beds of lycopodium moss growing in great luxuriance.

Mr and Mrs Cunliffe received them warmly and with evident pleasure. At the same time, there was a quick, close scrutiny on the part of the gentleman as he shook hands with the prince. He knew Mir Yacoob by name, and had heard of him as one of the most advanced of the Hyderabad nobles. It was therefore with some curiosity that he met him. He was in no way disappointed. The native who stood before him resembled no one, either Mohammedan or Hindu, who had hitherto crossed the collector's path. His instinct told him that he was in the presence of a man who would grace any society in the East or West.

From Mir Yacoob Mr Cunliffe's eyes turned to Lorina. She was dressed entirely in white, and, though it was only a morning frock, it was one of those charming creations in lace and muslin designed by Edith, and perfect in every detail. A large white hat completed the costume. The only colour about her was in her cheeks. She was the embodiment of healthy, happy English girlhood, fresh from the old country.

"I am so sorry that I was not told of your visit," she was saying to Mrs Cunliffe. "I should have been pleased to have seen you. I heard nothing of it till this morning, when Mir Yacoob mentioned it. He was kept in ignorance, too, till Mr Cunliffe's letter came."

"I suppose we ought to have written before calling, and asked you to appoint an hour."



"I am not sure if the Begum would consider it etiquette to allow a gentleman to enter the house, even if none of the members of the harem were present," replied Lorina. "But there can be no objection to one of our own sex, whether she be European or Asiatic; and I hope you will come another day."

"The Begum has never received any of the Vellore ladies, so perhaps she would prefer that I met you in the big house in front of the harem," suggested Mrs Cunliffe, who had no wish to force her society on the Mohammedan lady.

"That is the house where Mir Yacoob lives. We will ask what she would like. But I have a sitting-room for my own and Mrs Russel's use—the lady who is staying with me. It is near the entrance to the harem, and there would be no danger of intruding on the Begum's privacy if I received you there."

"You have a room to yourself, then?" queried Mrs Cunliffe.

Her curiosity was pardonable; she was anxious to know if the girl was comfortable and happy. If she were not, it would be Mr Cunliffe's business to interfere.

"Yes; the Begum has given us a suite of rooms, well furnished and comfortable enough in their way. But I shall be very glad when my husband can take me to his house in Hyderabad."

The word "husband" caught the collector's ear, and he turned quickly towards Lorina.

"You have quite made up your mind to be married, then?" he said. "I am afraid you will have some difficulty in getting the marriage ceremony performed, if you want it done in an English church, unless, of course, Mir Yacoob has embraced Christianity."

He looked at the prince, who replied at once:

"I have no intention whatever of changing my faith."

"The English ceremony is already performed. We were married in England, and we are waiting now for the Mohammedan ceremony," said Lorina.

Her words took the collector by surprise, and he did not speak. Mrs Cunliffe, unable to hide her astonishment, exclaimed:

"You are his wife already?"

"Yes, according to English law."

"We were told that you had come out, free and unfettered, and that you were paying the family a visit before you took the final step."

"That was the proposal; but I objected to it. It showed an unnecessary distrust of Mir Yacoob. I insisted on having the English rite performed before he sailed for India, though he was good enough to say that he would wait, if I wished it."

"Will you think me inquisitive if I ask you when the Mohammedan ceremony will take place?" said the collector.

"In a few days, I hope," replied Lorina. "There is nothing that I know of to delay it."

"And afterwards?"

"We go to Hyderabad at once, and Mrs Russel returns to England."

Both the collector and his wife were silent for a moment; it was all so different from what they had imagined.

"I have a place at Hyderabad, where my wife will have an establishment such as Mrs Cunliffe has here," said Mir Yacoob.

"She will be gosha?" queried Mrs Cunliffe.

"Oh dear no!" exclaimed Lorina, her eyes alight with enthusiasm. "We are going to show the Mussulman world how very different their married lives may be. We hope to give them a higher notion of domestic



happiness by letting them have an example of it before them. Perhaps in time they may be persuaded to adopt some of the Western customs which are not contrary to their religion. I have no wish to interfere with their religion."

"You have a gigantic task before you," remarked Mrs Cunliffe.

"Have you made any reforms yet in the Begum's house?" asked Mr Cunliffe.

There was a twinkle in his eye, and the suspicion of a smile about his mouth, as he put the question. Perhaps he was thinking of the reception he had met with at the harem gate. Lorina caught the twinkle and laughed heartily. She looked at Mir Yacoob, who joined in the laugh.

"No, indeed! we have failed signally so far. Instead of making reforms, we have ignominiously been obliged to plot and plan to obtain our own freedom. It required quite a little bit of manœuvring to get here today. And what the Begum will have to say on the subject of such a departure from the custom of the harem we have yet to hear. We came without asking her permission or telling her of our intention."

"You are not a prisoner?" asked Mr Cunliffe, quickly.

"Not really, though I have sometimes felt like one. I have Mir Yacoob close at hand, as well as Mrs Russel in the house, to help me in getting my own way when I seriously want it, as I did this morning."

The collector was not blind to the excellent understanding which existed between the young couple. He was satisfied that the girl was a free agent, and that the prince had her welfare at heart. He turned to Mir Yacoob, and talked of other matters.

"How did you know I was here?" asked Lorina, of Mrs Cunliffe.

"We heard of you from some people who know some people who know your people."

"What a roundabout way!"

"Just like India!" added Mrs Cunliffe. "It is quite the exception in these days of travel not to find some connecting link with mutual friends in that 'round-about' way, as you call it."

"Who are the people, may I ask?"

"The lady who wrote to us about you was a Mrs Cunningham. She heard it from friends who knew you, or knew of you, in England. She told us that you were contemplating marriage with Mir Yacoob. She didn't mention that part of the ceremony had been performed."

Lorina had no suspicion that it was a piece of forethought and care on the part of Alan Archdale, nor that the collector had been asked to see that no harm came to the quixotic English girl. Alan had requested that his name should not be divulged. He had not forgotten Lorina's old objection to anything that looked like interference and protection.

"Then Mrs Cunningham must have heard it from some one who has not met my father and mother lately."

"Very probably," said Mrs Cunliffe, anxious to get away from that particular topic.

They talked a little longer, and then Lorina rose to go. As she did so, Mrs Cunliffe said:

"Can you spare a few days before the final ceremony to pay us a visit? We shall be so pleased to have you, if you can give us a little time."

"Yes, do," said Mr Cunliffe, heartily seconding his wife.

"Thank you very much indeed. I am sorry that I can't accept your kind invitation. I have promised



to remain with the Begum till the Mohammedan marriage is performed."

Mir Yacoob heard her refusal, and he approached nearer to her side.

"I am sure that my mother will excuse you, if you wish to come here," he said, in a low, earnest voice.

"I couldn't think of asking her to excuse me," she replied, unshaken in her determination.

"But you would be much happier here, where you would have more congenial surroundings and complete liberty. I could come and see you every day as easily as I see you there."

More easily, indeed, if Mir Yacoob had spoken the exact truth.

Mr Cunliffe watched the prince with curiosity. He seemed eager that Lorina should accept the invitation, which was strange, if she were going to become a member of the family so soon. The collector was puzzled; and he was a man who prided himself on being able to fathom the Oriental character. Lorina was not to be persuaded.

"No; I should not be happier here. I should feel that I was turning my back on the very object I had in view when I came out. I came to know the Mohammedan ladies, and to influence them for their good. That can only be done by living amongst them as I am doing now."

"You might surely begin your work after your marriage," urged Mrs Cunliffe.

"But I am married already," she cried. "And my husband's mother's house is the proper place for me until I can go to my own home."

It was in Mr Cunliffe's mind to suggest to Mir Yacoob that the Mohammedan ceremony should be hurried on. But there was just that about the young

man's bearing which made him silent. He felt that he could no more dictate to him than he could dictate to an English gentleman. Nor could he ask personal questions in the judicial but courteous style which he customarily adopted towards the ordinary natives who came under his jurisdiction, and needed a little moral suasion. Mir Yacoob was not a man with whom he could take such liberties; nor did the collector feel that he was justified in showing any want of confidence in him. All he said was:

"I am sorry that we cannot persuade you to change your mind."

"Perhaps at some other time——" ventured Mrs Cunliffe, as she held Lorina's hand for a moment.

The collector took up her words.

"Remember, both of you, that as long as we are in the country, there is a home here and a warm welcome for our country-woman whenever she may wish to claim it."

"I will remember your offer, though I hope it may never be needed," replied Mir Yacoob.

His tone rang genuine and true in the keen ear of the Government servant, and did more to strengthen the confidence already inspired than anything which had gone before. Lorina added her thanks to those of Mir Yacoob, and they departed. The collector and his wife watched the carriage drive away.

"What a strange couple!" remarked Mr Cunliffe. "He is in love with her; but she?"

He looked at his wife.

"She is in love with the idea," she replied.

"Possibly, it may be so; though he is handsome enough and charming enough to make any girl lose her heart and her head. I can understand her parents consenting to the marriage, now that I have seen him.



Yet it is a pity, a great pity," he concluded, thoughtfully.

"They may be very happy in themselves, if they get away from his family and the intrigues of the harem. Her plans of reforming Mohammedanism socially are delightfully quixotic, not to say impossible."

Mr Cunliffe did not reply immediately. His carriage waited to take him to the Kutcheri; but his mind was full of his late visitors and his duty towards his countrywoman.

"Their difficulties will begin when children come. They will be legitimate, and he will want to have them brought up as Mohammedans; otherwise they cannot inherit from him," he said at last, more to himself than to his wife. She replied, however:

"That was a contingency which her mother probably never mentioned. The girl has only considered the situation from the wife's point of view, and from the philanthropist's. It is not the custom of English mothers to speak to their daughters before marriage of motherhood and maternal duties."

"If the girl had been free, I think I should have moved heaven and earth to keep her so. But the knot has been tied in England; and there is nothing to be done now but see that it is completed as speedily as possible. I must talk to the kazee, and warn him that everything must be done properly and legally. Until the ceremony is performed she is no wife in their eyes, though the law might recognise her English marriage as binding on him; and therefore she cannot take her proper place either in his house or before the Muslim world. Why couldn't she have chosen a sturdy young Briton for a mate? Such a girl as that might surely have had her pick? It is a pity, a sad pity!"

"I think he means well, and will do his best to make her his honoured wife," said Mrs Cunliffe, on whom the prince had made a favourable impression.

"If so, he must insist on having the shahdee ceremony performed. It is usually the privilege of the wife who has been chosen for him by his mother, and not by himself. I don't know much about the ceremony, except that it is long, and requires the presence of the bridegroom's mother and sister, who take an active part in it. The nikah is the ordinary form of marriage, used when the man makes his own choice without consulting his family, as Mir Yacoob has done in this case; it does not require the presence of his family."

"Of course Miss Carlyon must have the shahdee performed."

"Undoubtedly; otherwise his family will not honour her."

"Is there any other form of marriage?"

"There is the murtah—a base form used when a man contracts a union with a slave. It can be pronounced at any moment, and in a few minutes. It is not held to be honourable, though the children of the union are legitimatised by it. The Mohammedans have a great dislike to illegitimacy; and they strive, by an easy form of temporary marriage, to lift the stigma of disgraceful birth from the children of unequal unions."

"Marriage seems a very easy affair with them," remarked Mrs Cunliffe.

"Nothing is easier; a few words before witnesses, and the deed is done. Divorce is almost as easy. I am speaking of the Mohammedans of South India; I know nothing of those elsewhere. The shahdee, however, is quite another affair, and there may be



difficulty in enforcing it. I shall make it clear to the kazee that there must be no trifling nor shirking in the matter."

"Miss Carlyon is apparently under no apprehension. She regards the prince as her husband already, and spoke of him to-day as such."

"She is probably in complete ignorance on the subject. What can she know of the intricacies of Mussulman marriage? They puzzle wiser and more learned people than herself. It must be my business to enlighten her, as far as I am able, if I find that the prince is not doing the right thing. But I hope and believe that he has a sufficient sense of honour to insist on the shahdee; and that interference on my part will not be necessary."

As the brougham containing Mir Yacoob and Lorina passed out of the collector's gateway, the girl's eye caught a glimpse of a syce standing by the side of the road.

"There's one of the Begum's men; so, you see, we have been followed and watched, as usual," she cried.

"It doesn't matter if we have been watched. I shall see my mother as soon as we get back, and will tell her all that has occurred."

It was very kind of Mrs Cunliffe to invite me to stay with her. You seemed very anxious to get rid of me, Yacoob."

She smiled as she spoke, and her words were robbed of the reproach they implied.

"No, dear lady; it was not that I was anxious to get rid of you. It was because you have become so dear to me, and I thought it would be best if you were away from all the intrigues of the harem which make you unhappy."

He spoke softly and tenderly, and there was a ring of sadness in his tone which touched her.

"I know that you were only considering my comfort when you proposed it, or, rather, seconded the proposal, I should say. But I am quite satisfied to remain with the Begum. I am under your wing, and I could not be in safer keeping."

"Allah grant that it may be so," he replied, fervently.



CHAPTER VI

MAJOON

"If you give mustard, take care that you do not get red pepper in exchange."—*Singhalese saying.*

THE following morning, true to her promise, Lorina, accompanied by Mrs Russel, went to the dolls' wedding. It was held in the rooms occupied by Dowluth. They were decorated with bright-coloured hangings of silk and muslin. Paper chains festooned the walls, and bunches of green foliage hung above the doors. The sound of tomtoms and wailing music, not unlike the strains of bagpipes, fell on her ear as she approached the gay scene. The crowd which had gathered astonished her. They were all women and girls, and where they came from was a mystery she could not solve. They wore silk cloths, and displayed massive jewellery, which shone with barbaric splendour in the morning light. The company chattered and laughed among themselves, making jokes freely on the bridegroom.

As Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm ran forward to greet their guest their faces were alight with excitement.

"Ah, sister, you have not put on your diamonds! What a pity! It is such a grand occasion for wearing jewels. Look at ours! are they not beautiful?"

They displayed their treasures with pardonable pride. The pearls were woven into ropes and tassels, and were twined round their delicate necks and arms and amongst

their tresses. The gems were set in quaint ornaments of arabesque design, from which drooped large pear-shaped pearls of exquisite beauty.

"Where is the bride?"

"She has not appeared yet. We held the betrothal four weeks ago; to-day we make the marriage, and the bride and bridegroom are to meet for the first time. In a real marriage these ceremonies would take place on different days, but our mother will not allow us to prolong it. See, here are some dancing-girls."

They moved farther up the room, towards a dais on which was spread a bountiful supply of cushions. A sofa occupied the centre, and on its right hand were two low chairs which were offered to Lorina and Mrs Russel.

"Dance! dance!" cried Noor-i-Chasm, clapping her hands to attract the attention of the dancing-girls.

Jingling their silver bells, they advanced to the foot of the dais, salaamed low, and began to tread their nautch steps. The music piped and twanged to the rhythmical beat of the tomtoms.

"Aren't they clever? They are of our own household. Will you have some sweets, sister?"

A slave-girl brought a silver tray of sugar dainties and presented them to the ladies. She then handed the tray to Shahjee, dropping on her knees, and smiling with happy consciousness.

"See," exclaimed the delighted Shahjee. "She salutes me as the bridegroom's sister. Ah! we are important people to-day, are we not, Noor-i-Chasm?"

The spangled muslin draperies fluttered in the soft breeze; the merry crowd, decked in rainbow tints, moved hither and thither, now watching the dancers, now eating sweetmeats, or lazily toying with bright palm-leaf fans. The nautch continued for some time,



and, under the influence of the strange pageantry of the scene, Lorina gazed into a new world. Suddenly three grotesque creatures burst in amongst the dancers, scattering them to right and left. One had a green face, another a skin of coal-black hue, the third was of the brightest golden yellow that saffron could produce. Their clothes were bizarre and fantastical in the extreme. The music still continued, and the new-comers took the place of the nautch girls, imitating their steps and poses with clever caricature, which elicited peals of laughter from all sides. The musicians could scarcely continue their labours for laughing. As for Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm, they were convulsed; even Lorina was infected, and joined in the merriment. The dancing girls, recovering from their surprise, resumed their dancing, but every attempt was frustrated by the three comic characters, who were encouraged by rounds of applause. Finding it impossible to continue the dance, the girls attacked the musicians, and stopped the piping and drumming. The intruders were inexpressibly funny in their efforts to dance without music. Failing to keep up the nautch, they changed their fooling, and began to joke about the bride and bridegroom. Fortunately for Lorina, she was unable to comprehend their meaning, for, although there was nothing to offend the taste of the harem, the jokes would not have pleased English ears. At a signal the merriment was hushed, and the comic characters were unceremoniously hustled aside. As they took their places among the audience, Lorina had a better opportunity of observing them.

"They are girls too, are they not?" she asked.

"Yes; all the players are women and girls," replied Shahjee. "Here comes the bridegroom's mother. Now we shall take a part."

The sound of chanting and music fell on her ears, and a palanquin was carried into the room by the harem gardeners and watermen. The musicians, walking before it in procession, stopped every six steps or so to tread round in a small circle as they piped. The bearers' feet shuffled in time, and the palanquin swung to and fro with the movement. The scarlet curtains swayed, and there was a glitter of tinsel and gold which was thoroughly in keeping with the gorgeous spectacle. A messenger was sent to bid the bride come forth to greet her mother-in-law.

"Now we shall see the bride. Oh, she is beautiful!" cried Noor-i-Chasm, trembling with excitement.

Lorina marvelled at the realism of all this grown-up play, as she felt the girl's slender fingers close convulsively upon her arm. She could not understand half the mummery that was being enacted; the running to and fro, the mixture of elaborate ceremonial with wild confusion, the orderly crowd grouped in disorderly fashion, gazing, laughing, chattering as they would, whilst the palanquin was brought inch by inch to the foot of the dais. There it swayed and glistened in a narrow ray of sunlight as the breathless bearers shuffled and bent beneath its weight. Yet, as she marvelled, she, too, felt something of the fascination of the scene. It was picturesque, and stirred the senses through the eye.

And now a wave of expectancy passed over the crowd; voices were subdued, and all eyes were directed towards a curtained doorway behind the dais. Shahjee rose from her cushions.

"We must go and take our places by the palanquin. You will see how finely we will do our parts, my sister and I," she said, with the pride of a débutante on the amateur stage.



She took Noor-i-Chasm by the hand and led her down the steps of the dais. The curtain over the door was slowly raised, and a woman, plainly dressed and without ornament, came forth, carrying in her arms a figure attired as a bride. The gold-embroidered robe hid the doll's face entirely. She advanced to the front of the dais and held the bride towards the palanquin. The hangings were drawn aside, and Dowluth, in the character of the mother-in-law, stepped forth, supported by Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm. Again there was ceremony as the players proceeded to the sofa and propped up the doll upon its cushions. Jokes and jests passed amongst the company, whilst betel-nut and leaf were handed round. The members of the harem chosen to represent the bride's mother and sisters grouped themselves round the curious dwarfed figure of the doll that sat so strangely still in the midst of all the babble and motion. Dowluth and the two girls took their places amongst them. An old woman with spectacles on her nose represented the kazee. A roll of paper was produced, and the venerable magistrate made a great show of scribbling with a large pen, the scratching of which afforded immense amusement to the company. When the kazee's business was completed, the nautch girls resumed their dance, and the tomtoms beat again in rhythm to the strains of pipes and strings.

"Is the bride married yet?" asked Lorina of Mrs Russel.

"I think not. It looked to me like the settlement of the dowry. But there is probably a good deal of licence permitted, as it is not real. The charm of the play lies in the accessories, the music and dancing, the feasting and gaiety, which always accompany an Indian wedding."

Shahjee, noting the conversation between her guests, left her seat by the bride, and came to them.

"You must not go yet; the marriage has still to be made."

Lorina reassured her, and asked:

"Where is the bridegroom? I am anxious to see him."

"He is coming; we are expecting him every minute. Hark! there is his music."

She hurried back to the sofa, and whispered a word to Noor-i-Chasm. A red silk veil was unfurled, and the two sisters held it before the bride. Preceded by music, the bridegroom made his entry in slow and solemn state through the laughing, jesting crowd. He was carried by Cassim, on whose features, for the first time, Lorina detected a smile. Even he, with his heavy, stolid nature, was not impervious to the fun of the moment. It was not upon Cassim, however, that her eyes rested, but upon the extraordinary little figure in his arms. It was a rag doll, a mere bolster, robed in the richest satin, and wearing a magnificent jewelled turban. The effect, though gorgeous, was weird and uncanny, for the face was a dead blank, devoid of a single feature. The doll was propped up on the sofa opposite the bride, and the kazee appeared again with his scratchy pen and long roll of parchment. The rite being at an end, the pair were considered husband and wife, and now began the fun which so delighted the hearts of Shahjee and her sister.

"Come and see the play; come nearer, you can't see there," cried the elder girl to Lorina. "The bridegroom entreats us to allow him to look at the bride. Shall we, sister?" addressing Noor-i-Chasm, and removing the thick muslin that hid the doll's face. "Ah, how beautiful she is! Her eyes are like the stars! her



neck is as the moon's soft surface. Lower a corner of the veil, I entreat, I beg of you, or our brother will die."

She pretended to let the silk curtain fall, but Noor-i-Chasm drew it up.

"What!" she cried, in pretended indignation. "A bridegroom asks to see his bride, and he comes empty-handed! Who ever heard of such a thing? Has he no gifts, no flowers, no gems to bestow upon his heart's desire?"

A rose, thrust through the hoop of a diamond ring, was then thrown over the veil into the bride's lap.

"Ah! this is better. Say, sweet sister," and Shahjee addressed herself earnestly to the doll, "will you be kind to your husband? He is handsome beyond description. He has hair like the rays of the sun. His limbs are like the branches of the banyan-tree. His eyes burn as the lightning on the evening sky, and he dies to hold his bride in his arms."

Her words were full of passion and love. It was marvellous, coming from the mouth of a child secluded from the world.

"A strange form of amusement for educated women," said a voice in Lorina's ear.

She turned and found Mir Yacoob at her elbow. She was so absorbed in the play that she had not heard him approach.

"It is very amusing," she said.

"But hardly elevating or worthy."

"I have not thought of that. It has all been extremely interesting and novel. I wonder how far it represents the real thing."

"To a certain extent, I suppose, they have made it like a Mohammedan marriage; but the women of the harem will have given prominence to that portion of it which is not necessary, the tomarsha and fun. Each

family has its own traditions as to what that should be. It is like the reception at your—our——" he paused, and she concluded the sentence for him.

"Our wedding."

"Yes; but come away; you must be tired of the noise and fooling."

"No, indeed; I am not tired. I am sure Shahjee would like me to remain a little longer."

"Yes, please do stay," said Shahjee.

Lorina looked at him. The play had ceased temporarily, and all eyes were fixed on the prince.

"It pleases them; but if you want me elsewhere——"

"Not at all. I am on my way to my mother's room. I haven't seen her since our expedition to the Cunliffes, and I must go now to hear what she has to say about it."

"Will she scold you? Because, if so, I ought to be there to take my share," said Lorina, trying to lift the cloud from his brow.

But, though he smiled at her in gratitude for her graciousness, the sadness remained in his eyes. The amusements of the harem were not to his taste at any time, and they had never been so distasteful as he found them at the present moment. He had been accustomed to regard them with indifference tempered with a shade of regret. But Lorina's presence altered their aspect, and he was sensible of a feeling akin to shame that his sisters could find pleasure in such things. One of the dancing-girls, anxious to attract the notice of the prince, advanced to the foot of the dais and began to sing. In the harem she had some reputation as a vocalist, and her songs were always popular. Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm turned at once to listen, drawing Lorina's attention to the performer. The girl possessed a good voice, which was to a certain extent cultivated; and though



Lorina could not understand the words, she had no difficulty in recognising an impassioned abandonment in the style of rendering it, which indicated a love-song.

"Yacoob, tell me what she says; what are the words?"

The cloud on the prince's face gathered to a frown, as he replied, shortly:

"It is not worth repeating."

"O brother!" remonstrated Shahjee. "It is a beautiful song of love."

"English ladies are not accustomed to such songs. Indeed, you would be the better without them," he answered, with manifest annoyance.

Turning to the singer, he commanded her to cease. The girl, mortified and startled by the Shahzada's displeasure, retired quickly, and hid herself in the little group of nautch girls, where she wiped away a furtive tear. Disgrace covered her, unmerited disgrace. Had she not sung the very same song before the Beebee herself, and been praised and rewarded? Wherein could she have offended? The solution of the mystery was beyond her. A few minutes later Mir Yacoob departed, earnestly entreating Lorina not to stay much longer. The two sisters lost no time in resuming their places between the bride and bridegroom.

"Why have you given your dolls no features?" asked Lorina, as the girls shook out the red silk veil again.

"How could we give them faces? By doing so we should offend against the teaching of the Koran; and at the Judgment Day reproach would fall upon us. The dolls would say, 'You have given us eyes, noses, and mouths, but no souls'; now there can be no reproach, for they can neither see, smell, hear, nor speak, and are as stones or blocks of wood."

Dowluth, who had taken part in the play with a

grim appreciation of the fun up to the time of the prince's appearance, interrupted to declare her intention of retiring.

"It is time we finished this child's-play," she said.

Both the girls exclaimed at her decision.

"Do let us go on," they begged. "We will have the nautch again to amuse the bride and bridegroom. This will not necessitate your presence."

"I must go to the Beebee; I have been too long away," said the old woman, as much to herself as to Shahjee.

Further discussion was prevented by a sharp scream in a childish voice. One of Lalbee's little attendants—the one who had seemed unhappy in the garden—suddenly appeared, and ran swiftly towards them. A slave-woman was in close pursuit, but the small, agile creature evaded her grasp, and scrambled on to the dais.

"I want to see the dollies," she cried, shrilly.

Before any of the spectators could stop her, she seized the bride, and was scudding down the room with her loot. Escape, however, was impossible in such a crowd, and the child was caught. She immediately dashed the doll to the ground with the fury of a tiger-cat, and set herself to scratch and bite her captors. Shahjee stamped her foot with a momentary wrath which astonished Lorina. Had she not witnessed it she would not have believed it possible for the gentle Shahjee to be so angry.

"Beat her! beat her well!" she cried.

Dowluth took the child from the ayah with a vicious alacrity which boded ill for the wayward mite.

"Oh, don't hurt her; she doesn't know any better; and, of course, she wanted to see the dolls. We ought to have had the children here all this time."

"It is not a game for the children; it is our play,



made expressly for Noor-i-Chasm and myself," replied Shahjee, recovering herself, but still ruffled with anger.

"In any case, please don't punish the child. It will be quite sufficient punishment if you send her away."

Dowluth regarded the offender doubtfully, and finally handed her over to the ayah with a few whispered words. The woman nodded and left the room, the child renewing its screams and struggles.

"She wants punishment, indeed she does, sister," said Shahjee, earnestly. "Only the other day she was very disobedient, and when she was scolded she cried for her mother, and asked to be taken back to her village. Unfortunately, the mother came that very day, and there was much trouble with her as well."

Lorina turned to speak to Dowluth, but she had disappeared. Shahjee signed to the nautch girls, and the music and dancing recommenced, to the delight of the general company.

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It was half-past twelve. The Begum, whose hours were different from her son's and her guests', had finished her lunch. She was reclining on her cushions, toying with a fan of scented grass on which gleamed spangles of gold and the metallic green of beetle-wings. A pale blue satin coverlet embroidered in white and silver was drawn over her feet. On a low Damascus table, inlaid with mother-o'-pearl, stood a bowl of rose-water. Although she was no longer young, there were the remains of beauty in her pale face and regular features. Being a widow, her white draperies were devoid of embroidery, and she wore no jewels. But these personal adornments were scarcely missed. The Begum amply made up for their loss in her rich, luxurious surroundings; the hangings of her room, the pillows on which she rested, the dress of her slaves,

even the hookah and the fan—all contributed to the artistic beauty of the Oriental scene. One of the handsome girls who attended on her was preparing the hookah when Mir Yacoob entered the room. At a sign from her mistress she brought him a chair.

To his great astonishment, the Begum greeted him with a smile of welcome. There was not a trace of anger or annoyance in her manner. His wonder was not decreased when she spoke. Her words were unusually gentle and kind.

"Where did you go yesterday with your betrothed, my son? Your departure was so sudden, I had no time to ask your destination."

She had no real need to put the question. Her messenger had actually travelled back on the foot-board behind the brougham, where he was hidden from the view of the occupants. By a short cut across some fields he had entered the harem just four minutes before the prince and his companion.

The use of the word "betrothed" (nisbuth) was a pleasant surprise, and a great concession. She had never called Lorina by that name before. It had generally been "the stranger," or the "foreign lady," and even "that infidel woman" on rare occasions. He replied genially, and more in the manner of the son of earlier days:

"We went to see the collector and his wife. When they found that they were not admitted here, Mr Cunliffe wrote a letter asking me to bring Miss Carlyon to his house; he wished to see her immediately. She consented to go, and so we departed without delay."

The girl had prepared the pipe by this time. She handed the mouthpiece to her mistress, and the Begum's attention was entirely occupied in the inhalation of its smoke. There was silence for a while,



during which Mir Yacoob's eyes rested on his mother. How much more pleasant it was to have her like this; how smoothly life would run for him and his bride if this were the attitude she would always adopt.

"Did they receive you kindly, and according to your rank?" she asked, presently.

"They were most kind and polite. Mrs Cunliffe asked Miss Carlyon if she would leave this house and stay with her till the shahdee was complete."

The heavy lids fell over the Begum's black eyes, and hid a sudden restless movement, betokening an emotion which had stirred her to the depths. It was the use Mir Yacoob had made of the expression shahdee. She inhaled a few more whiffs of the soothing weed before she continued her questionings. When she was sure of herself she said:

"What did Miss Carlyon reply?"

"She told Mrs Cunliffe that she preferred to remain here."

The girl had left the room, and they were quite alone.

"That is well," was the unexpected reply.

Again there was silence—a soothing, peaceful silence, which was very acceptable to the young man. The Begum broke it.

"The girl is beautiful, and since you desire her so much we must not let her go. When I look at her fair skin, shining like the wax-flower through her white lace garments, and when I watch the pomegranate tints that stain her cheeks and lips, I do not wonder that she draws you to her. Her hair is like the red-brown halo that surrounds the moon, when it rides at night through the broken storm-clouds; her eyes are stars stolen from the cross in the Southern sky. Such a woman would have drawn your father to the ends of the earth. Are all the English girls like your betrothed?"

Again the use of the word betrothed, which had been on his mother's lips before! It thrilled him strangely, as did also the description she had given of his bride. He marvelled at the change in the Begum's attitude, and thanked Allah that it had come at last. It was what he had been waiting for so long, and so patiently. His heart was warmed with gratitude, and his soul was flooded with a wave of tenderness towards his mother. He had not felt thus since the arrival of his bride.

"The English women are all fair, and have skins like the wax-flower; but they are not all beautiful. I have been fortunate in winning one who is reckoned a queen of beauty amongst them."

Dowluth entered as he spoke, and approached them, bearing two glasses on a tray, and a silver caraffe.

"She has brought us some sherbet. I usually have some whilst I take my hookah. You must be thirsty. Help the sahib to a glass of your sherbet, Dowluth," said the Begum.

Her son did not refuse the offered drink. It was cool and refreshing, and excellently made. The Begum took a glass from her faithful handmaid, and, as she did so, she said:

"Is this all the hospitality you have to offer in the harem. Have you no sweets?"

The woman hurried away, and returned with a small silver salver of sweetmeats, which she presented to the Mohammedan lady.

"What are these?"

"Confection of roses and ginger."

"I will have rose."

She helped herself daintily, and placed the sweet by her side, as she was still occupied with her hookah. Dowluth held the tray before the prince. He took



some of the ginger bonbons. It was an old weakness of his as a boy, and Dowluth had remembered it. Twice he was tempted to eat from the little salver, and she smiled as she saw the second helping pass his lips; his mother watched him narrowly through the blue smoke which curled from the hookah.

"Your betrothed is eager to become your wife, is she not?"

"She is not more eager than I am for the completion of the shahdee," he replied.

"Has she demanded the shahdee ceremony?"

He was slightly disconcerted by her question, but he replied, without hesitation:

"It is I who demand it."

"She, then, would be content with the nikah, or even the murtah; she cares nothing for our rites. Her infidel rites have already been performed, and she is content with them; for I have heard her speak of you as 'my husband' more than once." The Begum's voice sank low, and her words came slowly and softly. "At first I did not like to hear an infidel woman using that familiar term, but the word sounded sweet on her beautiful red lips." She paused, and laid down the mouthpiece of her hookah. Turning to him, she breathed lying sentences into his ear which deceived him. "I saw the warm light of love shining in the depth of her starlike eyes as she spoke the words 'my husband.' The scarlet colour in her cheeks deepened, and her full lips trembled as they repeated the beloved name. She is impatient, and yet you keep her waiting, my son! It is not usually the man who causes the delay; it is the woman who makes the delay. Your father would have scorned a man who proved himself such a cold lover, such an indifferent husband."



Her words had a subtle temptation in them, and they stirred him strangely.

"She knows nothing of shahdee nor nikah nor murtah," he said, shortly.

"And yet you make her and yourself miserable by waiting for the shahdee! She is entirely in your power. Why should you both be unhappy? If Allah had not willed that she should be yours, He would not have delivered her into your hands, and sent her to you across the broad water. There she is below, waiting your pleasure, ready to be your wife at the uplifting of your finger. Yet your arms are closed against her, and your lips are dumb and cold! Was there ever so cold a lover?"

The blood raced hotly through his veins as he listened, and he flushed under her scorn. Dowluth, ministering with an experienced hand, held a golden basin of water, in which he washed his fingers after touching the sweets. The fine English towel she handed to him had a faint scent of violets about it. It brought Lorina vividly to his mind. He had often seen her at Winston wearing a bunch of Neopolitan violets in her belt, and had noticed their scent. Occasionally he had observed the scent since she had been in Vellore, but it was artificial now; for though the plains of India can boast of some of the sweetest roses ever grown, they are destitute of violets. He held the towel in his fingers after he had dried them, and Dowluth did not offer to take it away.

Outside, in the heat of the noonday, a crested hoopoe uttered its soft coo, and a myna chattered drowsily to its mate in the neem-trees growing under the windows of the Begum's room. A breeze from the north-east blew through the venetians, rustling the foliage outside. In an adjoining room one of the slave-girls struck the zither, and sang a love-song. It was one which he had frequently heard in the harem in his boyhood. His



father loved it. Its plaintive wailing, sliding into the minor key at the end of each line, told the tale of a maiden who waited in vain for her lover. There was a soft voluptuousness about the atmosphere of the room, to which he was fast succumbing. It was not altogether unknown to him in days gone by, and he felt that it was robbing him of his senses. He leaned his throbbing head on his hand, and closed his burning eyes, hoping to shut out the sensation, but he was not successful. What strange influence was at work? What had come to him? What fire was this which was beginning to course through his veins, and make his limbs tremble? He moved restlessly in the low chair in which he sat by his mother's side. Her softly modulated voice fell on his ears again. She spoke dreamily, and between her sentences he could hear the zither, and follow the words of the song.

"The murtah ceremony might take place at any time —to-morrow—this very day." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Ay! this very hour she might be yours, if you chose."

His brows contracted with a heavy frown, and his breath came in quick, short gasps as his heart beat within his breast.

"It shall be the shahdee. I tell you that I will have the marriage complete,—such as is always given to a first wife," he cried, in an unsteady voice.

"Then there will be more weary waiting, weary waiting."

The voice of the slave-girl rose again in another verse of her song.

"Flowers droop and fade if they are left too long on the stalk. It would be a pity to see the roses die in that beautiful cheek, which even now should be softly pressed to thine, my son."

He stirred uneasily again in his chair, and gazed at her, as, resting on her elbow, she leaned towards him.

"The ceremony you so much desire shall follow on the murtah at any time after the preparations are complete. Your betrothed will not know the difference; she will not care; she is satisfied with her infidel rites. It is folly to trouble about the shahdee. There are reasons why I cannot give my consent immediately to the shahdee. But what you desire shall take place the day you leave for Hyderabad. I will give my consent then, if you make the murtah marriage now. Ah! my son, she will not say no. Why should you not be happy, and let your mother rejoice too in her son's happiness?"

There was a fiendish temptation in her words. Mir Yacoob knew it. Even with his brain fired beyond control, he recognised what the suggestion meant—a marriage which was contemptible in the Mussulman world. At any other time he would have risen in the strength of his nobler self, and would have spurned it as a temptation coming from Shaitan. But now he was bewildered; a demon was gnawing at his heart, and a hundred devils were rampant within him, each with a suggestion sent from hell itself.

Again the music with its seductive pleading fell on his ear, and the scent of the violets filled his nostrils. He sank back into his chair, and fell into a moody reverie, which his mother took care not to break. She had sown the seed; it would not be long before it brought forth fruit.

Suddenly he gripped the arms of his chair, and sat up. His brain reeled, and his eyes, scarcely knowing what they sought, wandered round the room with a dangerous wildness. They fell on Dowluth. She was closely watching him, like his mother. As his burning glance met hers she smiled. It was a hard, triumphant



smile; and its meaning flashed like a streak of lurid lightning through his darkened soul. He sprang towards her.

"Woman! what have you done? You have poisoned me with some of your hellish concoctions."

"Lie down, Huzoor," she said, soothingly, pushing some of the cushions together. "Lie down and rest; don't be afraid; you are not poisoned, but you have a fever. Put your head upon these pillows, and we will call the English lady to nurse you. Her white hand will cool your brow. It is folly to fight against the power of the joy-giving majoon."

"Ah! it is as I said; you have poisoned my soul as well as my body! Then you shall die. Die, in Allah's name! Die like a pariah dog, you daughter of dogs!"

His fingers closed round her throat in a deadly grip. His savage instincts were all aroused. He was the son of his forefathers, and his English training went for nought. Had his sword been at his side he would have slain the woman as he slew the sheep in the park at Winston when it crossed his path. She struggled to free herself, striving to speak, to cry for mercy; but he held her in the grip of a man who was mad. His face was transformed with fury and rage. In a few more seconds the life would have been squeezed out of her. But the Begum had risen to her feet. If she knew how to raise a storm, she had no fear of its consequences, and did not falter now. She crossed the room swiftly, and, before life had fled, her hands were upon his.

"Let her go, madman! Would you kill the woman who poured water on your father's feet? Loose her and let her go. She has but done my bidding."

Her words reached his brain, even though it was

deadened to all moral sense by the poisonous confection of Indian hemp which had been given to him. He loosened his grip, and let the unconscious woman fall into his mother's arms.

"Lie down, my son. You only increase your madness by giving way to your rage. There is no harm done. I will bring you a draught which will sooth you and restore your senses."

But she spoke to deaf ears. Clasping his aching head in his hands, he rushed blindly downstairs. At the gate he called to the guard. One of the women came forward and looked with foolish curiosity into his face, whilst the other busied herself with the clumsy lock. He raised his hand to strike her to the ground, but she fled behind the screen of the guard-house. The other, terrified for her life, flung open the door, and he was gone. Intoxicated as he was, his moral sense was not entirely stifled, and his better self struggled to make itself heard. The struggle was not in vain: its dictates were followed.

"Bring my horse, quick! Saddle it, and bring it at once," he cried, as he reached his house.

The peons saw at a glance that something was wrong. With frightened faces they ran to do his bidding, one to the stable, and others to the big gate of the compound to have it opened.

He went to his room, where a douche of fresh water temporarily cooled his head and quenched the burning of his brain. With hat and spurs he returned to the porch just as the syce brought the horse up at a sharp trot from the stables. None dared to ask a question, whether he would lunch, or whither he was going. His father, in these rages, had been known to fell a man to the earth who was foolish enough to cross his path at such a time. He sprang into the saddle and galloped up to



the gate, which swung open at his approach. He turned his horse's head towards the English cantonment, and was soon lost to view.

The peons and servants gazed at each other with awe, and cast nervous glances around them.

"What is it? Has Shaitan seized him? Is anything wrong with the English ladies, the cherished of his inmost heart?" asked the old peon, a venerable Mussulman, who was in authority over the out-door servants.

No one had any suggestion to offer, although there was a babel of voices, all describing at once what each had seen and what each imagined. The syce who brought the horse asked what he was to do. He could not follow his master as he was; he had not had time to put on his livery.

"Get dressed quickly, stupid, and go after the sahib. Who can tell where his madness will lead him?" said the old Mussulman.

The horse-keeper hurried away to fulfil the order, and in a short space of time he was going as swiftly as his legs would carry him in the direction he had seen his master take.

An inquiry at the harem gate elicited the fact that nothing untoward had happened to the English ladies. They were safe; they had returned from the doll's party, and were about to sit down to tiffin. Was anything wrong with the Begum? No; she, too, was safe: she was asleep in her room, or just about to go to sleep, having had a long visit from the sahib. Then what could have happened to the master? How like he had seemed to his late father—may Allah sanctify his beloved sepulchre!—as he strode into the verandah, his eyes aflame, his hand feeling unconsciously for the weapon which, unlike his father, he did not wear.

The men whispered amongst themselves. The effect of majoon was not unknown to them. But who could have given it to him? And if given in the harem, as it seemed likely, why was he not kept there till the trance and its consequences were over? What was the Beebee about to let a madman loose in that condition? Surely she must know that it was unwise, and that it would bring disgrace upon the family.

Thus they sat and gossiped, speculating wide of the mark. The sahib's lunch was prepared; but he did not come; and the sleepy mid-day hours passed into the afternoon. The day grew cooler, and the world awoke from its siesta. The birds resumed their busy fluttering amongst the foliage; the cattle emerged from the deep shadow of the margosa trees, and grazed, turning their heads towards their villages. The English of the cantonment issued forth from their cool houses to play tennis or drive. Lorina and Mrs Russel, refusing the offer of the close carriage, went out into the garden, where afternoon tea was presently brought to them by their faithful table attendant.

Upstairs the Begum still reclined on her cushions. She had denied herself to her daughters and Lalbee; and despatched them for a drive, with Cassim on the box to safeguard their gosha and their persons. Dowluth was lying at her feet. She had regained consciousness; but was still feeling shaken and deeply aggrieved. Never before had the young sahib showed signs of such fury and wrath. He had nearly killed her; how nearly not even the Begum herself knew.

"How much did you give him? Surely it was too large a dose. You are getting stupid in your old age," said the Begum, when she found that Dowluth was sufficiently recovered to talk.

"It was no stupidity," wailed the woman. "He did



but eat a like quantity that we have many times put before the Shahzada his father—the blessing and peace of Allah be with him! The Shahzada ate knowingly and willingly. He loved it. He also loved the zither; it soothed his intoxication; and he never fled from the harem. It is that infidel girl who has bewitched the young sahib. She has put a spell upon him, and he can only follow the dictates of her will. Her will is that the shahdee shall be performed before she receives him as a husband. And she will accomplish her wicked designs. May Allah blacken her face in hell fire!"

"She shall not! I say it!—I who am his mother! He may nikah her whilst he is intoxicated if he likes, for a marriage so made is no marriage at all; but the shahdee she shall never have," cried the Begum, with agitation. Calming herself, she continued, more quietly: "Dowluth, you understand; it must be the murtah when he recovers, and it must be soon. After that, he will send her back to her people; and we shall find him another wife amongst his own country-women."

Dowluth shook her head. She had no faith in such an issue; the spells of the infidel woman were too strong.

"He will never send her away."

The Begum did not reply; she remained some minutes plunged in thought, her subtle mind at work with fresh designs.

"We must draw him back to the harem before night; he must not be left alone in his own house as he is. Call one of the girls to make inquiry about him."

Dowluth raised herself into a sitting position, and called. As no one answered, she got upon her feet, somewhat surprised to find that she was still sound in body and could walk. The inattention of the girls served as a tonic. Taking one of the palm-leaf fans

which were lying about the room, she went in search of them. They were chattering and laughing among themselves, the object of their merriment being, as she rightly surmised, herself. She brought the handle of the fan down upon their backs, right and left, with a vigour that showed there was nothing the matter with her physically. Whimpering and squealing, the girls scattered to do her bidding, and bring her news of the sahib; whether he slept, whether he had eaten. If they could gain access to him they were to beg and pray him to return to his mother.

They were not long absent, and came back with the disconcerting news that he was not in his house at all. He had gone without taking his food. He had called for his horse and ridden away like the wind, the syce following as closely as possible. But who could keep up with a sahib who rode like the devil? At the entrance to the cantonment the syce had met the horse. It was riderless, covered with foam, and its sides were scored with the rowels of the spurs. Whether the Shahzada had gone to the railway station, or to the bazaar, or to a European's house, no one could say; the horse that carried him alone knew, and it could not speak. This was all that could be gleaned from the prince's household; there was nothing more to be learnt if they went a hundred times, and searched his house through.

Dowluth went back to the Begum, and told the story of the prince's flight. It aroused her anxiety, and her mind was full of forebodings. She knew the nature of the intoxication which she had allowed her handmaid to bring upon the young man. It would deprive him, in a great measure, of his senses, and throw him off his mental balance with a wild exhilaration; but it would not affect his powers of locomotion;



it was not altogether like wine in its effects. He was temperate by nature, and a faithful follower of the Prophet, though no bigot; neither wine nor any other intoxicant ever passed his lips. The Indian hemp had consequently obtained a more powerful sway over his nervous system, for the very reason that he had never indulged in any form of intoxication, Eastern or Western. There was nothing to be done but to wait patiently until he returned; and the Begum sent Dowluth to the chief of the guard at the outer gate to tell him to watch for the sahib's coming, and to report at once, no matter at what hour of the night it might be.

"Was ever a household more unfortunate?" grumbled Dowluth, as she went to do the Beebee's bidding. "Was ever a man more perverse? The sahib turns from his own garden of delights to seek the miserable shelter of the bazaar! Surely he is demented, bewitched, and devil-driven."

And Mir Yacoob, what of him?

As he dashed recklessly towards the cantonment, his better self taking his worser self into custody, he felt as if the demons of hell itself had been let loose upon him. They tore at his heart-strings in their endeavours to hold him back from his purpose. To fight them the more strenuously, he dug his spurs into his willing steed, until the creature was almost as mad as its rider. He rode direct to the house of the civil surgeon of Vellore, an Englishman, whom he had before consulted for a slight ailment. Practice amongst rich natives is never despised by the medical officers in the Indian Service. Mir Yacoob had been well satisfied on these occasions, and had paid handsomely for the attention he had received.

At the gateway of the compound he jumped off his horse, and, turning it loose, left it to find its way back

to its stable. An instinct of self-preservation made him hide the place of refuge he had sought. He knew his mother, and feared her; she was a persistent woman, capable of turning heaven and earth to compass her ends.

He walked down the path, staggering into the house unannounced, like a man under the influence of alcohol. Major Fawcett was finishing his solitary luncheon. He was surprised at the intrusion; but a single glance at his visitor's haggard face was sufficient to tell him that something was wrong.

"What is it, prince?"

"I have been poisoned."

"What with?"

Mir Yacoob named the drug, which was well-known to the Englishman, and cried hoarsely:

"In Allah's name, help me! Let me stay here until this fearful intoxication has passed away. It is only just beginning. Oh! curse them for their wickedness!"

Major Fawcett caught him by the arm, and led him into his own bedroom. Two able-bodied apothecaries were sent for from the civil dispensary; they and their chief set themselves to work to battle with the terrible drug.

In a darkened room the young man lay fighting with his madness. It was far worse than the madness of mere drink. If it had only been alcohol, a blessed unconsciousness would have brought the calm and rest which were denied him. But the exhilarating majoon acted on his nervous system; his perceptions were distorted; his brain was on fire. He conjured up visions which tormented his soul with their reality, and made him struggle again and again to be free. As the wind moved the curtain he thought he heard the slave-girls pass through his room; their soft, silken draperies



brushed the doorway, as they seemed to glide in and out of the room. Again they knelt before him, and offered the cooling sherbet and the seductive sweetmeat, whilst their gentle, fawn-like eyes were raised to his in humble submission and invitation. He put out his hands to seize them; as he did so, the girls vanished, and his fingers closed convulsively upon air, or were clasped by the firm, restraining hand of the apothecary. Fragments of the love-song he had heard in his mother's room fell on his ear, with the soft, dreamy accompaniment of the zither. He would rise and go to the singer, since she would not come at his entreaty; but Major Fawcett gently pushed him back upon the pillows; and when he fought for his liberty, strong arms held him till he was exhausted and quiescent. Then a beam of sunlight became a white star, which mounted on a rose-coloured sky; its ray pierced him, and drew him towards it. As he approached nearer and nearer, he saw it was no star, but the face of his beautiful English bride. Wafted on rosy clouds, he gazed into her eyes; there was a new light in them which had never shone there before. It was the light of love, and a smile of welcome played upon her lips, as she breathed the words "my husband!" Closer and closer the clouds lifted him; she bent towards him till the brown curls upon her forehead almost touched his cheek. But before he could clasp his arms around her she was gone; there was darkness, and once more he recognised the attendants hovering round his bed. The subdued light of the room grew soft and purple; and out of it he could hear his mother's voice. The words came with a terrible distinctness, striking on his ear like the notes of a bell.

"The murtah ceremony might take place at any time; to-morrow—this very day—this very hour she might be yours, if you chose."

Over and over again the words were repeated; and again, with mad cries and piteous entreaties, he struggled with his jailers to be free.

Outside the house the world ran its usual course, and its many voices came in faintly on the afternoon air. A carriage rumbled by; it carried Lalbee and the sick man's sisters, all unconscious of his suffering and misery. The laugh of the English at their tennis sounded pleasantly in the distance; and a messenger came running to the house to know why Major Fawcett did not keep his appointment at the club ground. Water-drawers chanted at the picottah in the next compound, as they made their monotonous march up and down the weighted bar. The water-skin splashed its contents into little culverts, and refreshing streams sped on their way to the thirsty garden-beds. A cook-boy in the road, coming back from the bazaar with a load of firewood upon his head, sang a song in long-drawn notes of a minor key as he marched sturdily along. A lizard chirruped in the verandah; but there was no one there to count its chirrups, and say whether they boded well or ill for the inmates of the house.

The afternoon wore away, and the sun disappeared in the west behind a bank of heavy cloud, which was streaked here and there with red light. Many anxious eyes looked towards it across the dry country. If rain did not come within the next fortnight there would be no escape from famine. The earth grew gray and dark. Still the surgeon laboured on, striving to conquer the evil work of the harem, and to bring peace and sanity to the afflicted prince. He never left his patient's bedside. His afternoon tea was brought into the room; and, later on, his dinner waited hour by hour untouched. It was past ten o'clock before the respite came in the shape of sleep; so tenacious had been the grip of the



drug upon that fine, delicately-strung nervous system. The visions grew fainter; the seductive forms fled into darkness; and the victim's wild supplications and prayers died on his lips. Sleep, blessed sleep, fell upon the blood-shot eyes, and brought relief to the over-wrought brain.

Major Fawcett drew a deep sigh as he bent over the prostrate form of the Mohammedan.

"Poor chap! what a struggle it has been! I wonder what fiend in human shape it was that gave him the dose, a veritable decoction of the devil's. And it was administered with no unsparing hand too. What could have been the object of such villainy?"

He had heard the gossip about Mir Yacoob and his English bride. He could give a shrewd guess why the prince had sought a haven of refuge with him; but he failed to fathom the iniquitous reason for the administration of the poison. After satisfying himself that the intoxication was past, and that his medicines had done their work, he turned his attention to his neglected dinner. He did not go to bed, for the excellent reason that he had given up his bed to Mir Yacoob. Having sent the apothecaries away, he lay down on a couch near his patient.

At five in the morning Mir Yacoob awoke. He raised himself on his pillows, and gazed round at his unrecognised surroundings in bewilderment.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"Safe in my house," replied Major Fawcett.

"Ah! now I remember. Have I been here all the time?"

"Yes; all the time." Major Fawcett laid an emphasis on the word *all*. "You tried to go more than once, and struggled like a fiend; but we were one too many for you, and kept you here."

"Thank you," said the prince.

There was a note of deep gratitude in his tone; the anxious look disappeared from his face, and he fell back with manifest relief. Major Fawcett called up his servants; and, before long, food and fresh coffee were brought. An hour later the two men were driving swiftly towards the prince's house.

"It would have been better for you if you could have remained with me to-day. You will feel very much shaken by what you have gone through," said the Englishman, as they neared their destination.

"You are very good; but it is necessary I should return. I am expecting some visitors at mid-day from Arcot. I have to receive them in state; and I cannot put them off. Is there any likelihood that the madness will return?"

"Not unless you take more of the drug."

"I should like to stop here, before we turn the corner. None of my people know where I have spent the night. I daresay they will find out in time; but meanwhile I should prefer to keep them in ignorance. I am very grateful for all you have done."

They shook hands, and Major Fawcett turned his horse's head round. When the dogcart had disappeared in a cloud of dust down the road, Mir Yacoob walked towards the entrance of his own compound. The guard recognised his voice, and hastily opened the gate.

Ten minutes later Dowluth stood before her mistress.

"He has returned."

"How?"

"On foot, alone."

"Where has he passed the night?"

"That is known to himself and Allah alone."

"Is he in his senses?"

"His madness has gone; but they say that he has blood in his eyes, like a man who has seen a devil."



"It is Allah's will," sighed the Begum, resigning herself to fate.

Her creed of fatalism relieved her from any uncomfortable feeling of remorse, which she might have experienced for having caused her son so much suffering. Allah had given her opportunities of which she had made good use. He had directed matters in His own way. With Him rested the responsibility of failure or success. She had done her part in endeavouring to bring about the girl's discomfiture. It was not her fault that her efforts had been unsuccessful. Allah willed it otherwise.

Dowluth was not inclined to show such resignation. As she moved away to do her usual morning work of supervision over the household she muttered to herself:

"Nay, rather is it Shaïtan's doing."

Her mood boded no good for the unfortunate beings who crossed her path that day.



CHAPTER VII

THE BEGUM GIVES HER CONSENT

"It needs a crooked finger to get butter out of a pot."
—*Hindu saying.*

AS Mir Yacoob entered his house the sound of children's voices came from the harem garden and fell faintly on his ear. He stopped and listened, and as he did so a tenderness crept over the haggard face.

All unconscious of his trouble, Lorina played with the little ones as usual. Their favourite spot was round the well, which was near the wall dividing the harem grounds from the outer compound. It had a fascination for them, partly because it was a forbidden spot when they were by themselves, and partly because of the legend of the girl who had been caught and kept prisoner in the jewel-chamber by the jins. They were never tired of gazing down at the mysterious passage, so plainly visible just now; and from the well they ran to the ventilator close to the wall. There they stood in awed silence, listening to the chirrup of the lizard, and the croak of the bull-frog, which they believed were the voices of the captive and her jailers. After racing round the garden-beds, the children moved towards the well, Lorina and Lalbee following.

"How is it that there are only three little attendants on your daughters this morning?" asked Lorina.

"One child has been naughty, and she is confined to the nursery."



Lorina remembered the scene of yesterday at the doll's wedding.

"It is necessary, I suppose, to punish occasionally; but it is an unpleasant task," she said.

"Oh yes; it must be done. The big girls have to be punished also sometimes."

They stood at the edge of the tank, looking down into its depths.

"See, the passage is quite open," said Lalbee, her eyes round with a curiosity as great as the children's.

"Yes; it would be easy to walk to the end," replied Lorina, in her practical manner.

The conversation was carried on partly in English and partly in Hindustani. Sometimes there was a laugh over the mistakes made on both sides; but in simple talk there was no difficulty in making themselves intelligible to each other. When Lorina suggested the possibility of walking up the passage she startled her hearers, and they stared at her with wide-eyed astonishment.

"The jins will catch you if you go there," lisped Zara, the eldest child.

"I'm not afraid of the jins. I have a charm here which will frighten them all away."

She held up her hand, on the fingers of which sparkled some rare gems, the gift of Mir Yacoob. Stepping lightly on to the top stone of the stairs, she stood looking down.

"Shall I go?"

Lalbee caught her skirts, and begged her not to venture. It was unspeakably dangerous; the jins were powerful, and easily took offence.

With a laugh at the dismay which was written on their faces, she slipped from Lalbee's grasp and descended half-way down the stairs. She raised a warning finger

and listened; then, with a little gesture of caution, she returned to her spell-bound companions.

"Did you hear the jins fly away when they felt my talisman approaching? They were so frightened," she said.

As she emerged from the haunted well, Dowluth appeared. She was looking sullen and cross. The treatment she had received the day before, and the failure of her schemes, had not been conducive to good humour. But her ill-temper changed to astonishment when she saw the English girl come out of the well. Lorina laughed heartily, and shook out her skirts.

"You look almost as startled as the children, Dowluth," she said.

Since she had gained her liberty, and called on Mrs Cunliffe, her spirits had risen, and she felt in good humour with all the world. She had a pleasant word even for those who had offended her by their espionage. Before Dowluth could reply, the little girls ran up to the old woman and began to plead on behalf of their absent companion.

"Please, let us have Mari-ammal to play with!"

"Ah! please, good Dowluth! She is very sorry, and will not be naughty again."

Dowluth's features grew stern, as she listened to their entreaties, and she gave a brusque refusal.

"Let the child come to us, since the children wish it," said Lorina.

But Dowluth was firm in her refusal.

"She has been naughty, and her mother has been giving trouble."

"How has her mother given trouble?"

"She has been to the house, demanding to see her daughter and take her away with her."

"Why shouldn't she have the child if she wants it?



You have no right to keep her against the parent's wishes."

"It is contrary to the agreement the mother made with us when she brought the child here."

"The law will oblige you to give her up," said Lorina, with some warmth.

"The law!" repeated Dowluth, scornfully. "The law in this house is the Beebee's word. We have no other law. She has spoken; and the child is not to return to its parents."

"It is most unjust! I never heard of such a thing! And you are punishing the poor little child because the mother asks to have her back?"

"The child was troublesome, and disturbed the happiness of the Beebee's daughters," said Dowluth, obstinately maintaining her point.

"She was naughty yesterday, I admit; but that is over, and the punishment should not be continued. I shall speak to the Begum about it."

The children, finding Dowluth obdurate, wasted no more of the precious morning hours in useless entreaty; they returned to their games. But there was no fun without the English lady.

They begged her to join them; and little Zara pointed down the steps. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she said:

"Go down again; go and frighten the jins again: I want to hear them fly away."

"No, no; it isn't safe," said Lalbee, trying in vain to silence her little daughter.

"It is perfectly safe," said Dowluth's voice at Lorina's elbow. "The stairs are strong and sound; the English lady may venture down to the water's edge, if she chooses, without any harm coming to her."

"But the jins! the jins, Dowluth?"

"Pah! the jins will do no harm. Do they touch the gardeners when they draw water?"

"The gardeners draw by a rope; they don't go down the steps."

"Foolish little ones! Go down, lady, and look up the dark passage; there is no danger."

"I have no fear," replied Lorina.

She was pleased to see the ill-tempered expression disappearing from the woman's face. She longed to be on good terms with the people who surrounded her. She was ready to take a great deal of trouble if only she could create a favourable impression, and influence them for their benefit.

"Take care you don't slip."

"I can swim if I fall into the water."

She went a short way down the stone steps, and ran back in pretended fear. The little people shouted in their wild excitement. They fancied they could hear the jins coming after the bold foreigner; and they laughed with delight when they found her safe at their side. Even Dowluth smiled, and was interested. The faithful old handmaid loved the two tiny children and their mother with a passionate devotion, which contrasted strangely with her severe treatment of the rest of the household. She was pleased to see them so happy. But there was another and a separate interest in Lorina's proceedings, apart from the children's pleasure, which made her watch the English girl curiously each time she descended the steps.

The opening into the wall of the well was about twelve feet below the ground. The water was so low just now that the floor of the passage was dry. During the rains the water rose till the entrance was quite hidden. At other times the circular arch was just visible. The slimy moss and water-weed that grew



upon the floor and walls of the passage were dried and shrivelled by the heat, and it was possible to walk with safety along the stone pavement.

Lorina looked curiously down the dark underground passage. In the far distance—the end, as she supposed—there was a faint ray of light. She was gazing earnestly into the darkness, when she heard the little voices above her in the language she was beginning to understand.

"Come up, come up, sister," they cried. "Come up, or the jins will catch you. Oh, do come up!"

She could not resist their entreaties, and, running up the steps once more, she landed safe in their midst. She was met by a chorus of happy laughter. She was out of breath, and had had enough of such unwonted exercise for the morning.

"No; no more!" she cried, as the children, with an insatiable appetite for excitement, begged her to go again. "See, there are the ayahs coming for you; you must go."

Very unwillingly were they led away, but they were consoled with the promise of a continuation of the fun on the morrow. They looked such queer little creatures, in their full satin trousers and jackets—they did not wear petticoats—they were like quaint dolls, and they felt small and unreal as Lorina lifted them, first one and then the other, in her arms to kiss them. They were very different from the firm-limbed young Britons of her native country. The tiny black attendants wore full petticoats of bright-coloured cotton; but they had the same shaped jackets, made in inferior materials. They each touched the forehead, and said "Salaam," as they followed the ayahs.

Lalbee sometimes departed with the children, but this morning she lingered by Lorina's side. They

turned towards the seats under the tamarind-trees. The early breakfast had been cleared away, and the garden was deserted. There was still some time before Lorina need go into the house. The morning was cool and fresh, the sun being occasionally hidden by a passing cloud. She was always pleased to have Lalbee with her. She observed that the young matron never came with Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm. The only opportunity, therefore, of seeing her was at this time, unless she joined her in a drive in the evening. Lalbee's expressive eyes were often turned upon her with a wistful look, and more than once she fancied that she had seen them suffused with tears. There were moments when the mute pleading of those eyes gave her pain. At other times she fancied that Lalbee had something to say, some sad story to tell, which was for her ear alone. She thought so now, when she found her still by her side. But before Lalbee could gain courage to speak, she heard Dowluth's voice close behind her.

"It is time for you to go in also. The Beebee waits to see you."

The girl cast an apprehensive glance at the woman, and departed in silence. Once more Lorina's spirit was stirred into rebellion against this tyrant of the harem, who ruled in the name of the Begum. However, she could not remonstrate; it would not be wise to oppose where there was nothing more than mere arbitrariness. She moved impatiently away, hoping to be relieved of the presence of the woman, the sight of whom was sufficient to irritate her. But Dowluth followed persistently. Lorina walked towards the door of the harem with no particular intention of going out.

"Open!" cried Dowluth.

Her call brought out the armed men and the women



guards. One of these unlocked the heavy door, and the English girl, pleased with the opportunity of escaping, passed out. Now, at least, she thought, she would be rid of her obnoxious companion. But she was mistaken. Dowluth was not a relative of the family, whatever her position might be in the house, and she was not obliged to keep her gosha as strictly as the members of the family. She drew her muslin cloth over her head, covering her face all but the eyes, and walked by Lorina's side.

Mir Yacoob's house stood near the harem. The usual untidy, luxuriant garden of the tropics blossomed round it. Unpruned flowering shrubs, beds of rank marigolds and zinnias, pots of palms, ferns, and foliage plants helped to make a wild disorder, which was picturesque and beautiful in its own peculiar style. An avenue of magnificent banyan-trees lined the long carriage-drive; and on one side of this a gleam of silvery water shone in the morning light. It was a small artificial lake of crescent shape, the horn at one end running up into the garden close to Mir Yacoob's house.

Lorina took the road under the avenue. Her quick eye marked each bird that crossed her vision, the golden oriole, the green parrot, and the tawny pheasant-crow, as they hurried to the feast of red berries provided in such lavish profusion by the ficus.

"Does the wall go round the whole of the compound?" asked Lorina.

"Quite round; and there is no gate in it but this one. It is a very strong wall. In days gone by it gave shelter to an English woman."

"Tell me about her."

"Many years ago the native troops belonging to the Kumpanee Bahadur* mutinied. They turned upon

* The Honourable East India Company.

their English officers quartered in the fort at Vellore, and they shot them. An English lady escaped, and sought refuge here. The master of the house happened to be here at the time. When he saw how beautiful she was, he fell under the spell of her witchcraft, and married her."

"And she? Was she satisfied to be his wife?"

"It was her doing; it was she who wished to marry him."

"What a pretty story! And did they live happily afterwards?"

"She had a child. The child died; and she died too. The harem is not a good place for English women; it is too secluded. They cannot bear to be shut up within its darkened walls, and they die."

They reached the gate. It had double doors, and they were fastened with a large padlock. As Lorina looked at the lock, a curious old piece of Indian workmanship, she was seized with a desire to have the gates opened—not that she particularly wished to go outside, but the mere sight of the heavy doors swinging open at her command, would give her a sense of liberty, she thought. She called, and two men in uniform appeared at her summons.

"Open!" she cried, as Dowluth had done.

The men hesitated, but, at a sign from her companion, they unlocked the huge padlock, and flung both the gates wide open.

Lorina passed through them, and stood in the middle of the road with a delicious sense of freedom. The road was dusty and uninviting to the pedestrian. Still, there was a charm about being in the open country again which was fascinating, and she was in no hurry to turn her back upon it. Dowluth, too, was not watching her, nor dogging her steps. Mir Yacoob



had apparently spoken to some purpose, and the espionage was relaxed. Lorina gathered a few wayside flowers, powdered though they were with dust. The gloriosa superba lily had thrown its tendrils over the cactus hedge that bordered the road, and hung its orange and scarlet blossoms within tempting reach. A pale yellow ænothera lifted its dark eye to the sun, and a blue pimpernel spread its tender blossoms on the ground at her feet. But leaf and petal were alike powdered with the fine dust of the road. Rain was wanted badly. It was slow in coming, but there were many signs that it was not far off. The sound of hoofs in the distance fell on her ear; she glanced down the road. Two riders approached, and she recognised Mr and Mrs Cunliffe.

"Good morning. I am glad to see that you are allowed to come outside the gates," said the collector, pulling up.

"But you must take care not to remain out too long in the sun," added Mrs Cunliffe, "I see that you have been gathering the beautiful gloriosa lily."

"Is that its name? It is lovely. I should like to have more of it for my vases."

"Show it to the gardener, and tell him to bring you some. It grows wild all about this part."

"You should ride in the morning, Miss Carlyon. It is much pleasanter than walking," said Mr Cunliffe.

Lorina laughed with sudden merriment, as she remembered the difficulties which had been raised to prevent her from riding. She began to relate some of them.

"You would have been amused at our efforts in that direction. Mir Yacoob did his best to get me a mount, but we were defeated at all points. He is still trying to accomplish it; but it seems that riding is not looked

upon as a proper amusement for the ladies in the harem."

"You don't consider yourself one of the ladies of the harem, surely?"

"Am I not? As Mir Yacoob's wife I hope to be one, but subject to very different rules from those which govern the harem here."

"It is a dangerous experiment."

"I should call it a troublesome one, and trying at times to the temper; but I see no danger in it," said Lorina.

"For your sake I hope there is none. If at any time you feel that there is, remember that you have me at hand."

Again she laughed merrily and fearlessly.

"The only danger that I can see in the experiment is that of my losing my temper, and becoming a tyrant instead of a reformer."

"You must come again soon to see me; and next time I should like to take you to the club," said Mrs Cunliffe.

"In that case I must come alone. Mir Yacoob tells me that he hasn't made the acquaintance of the English stationed here, though he has plenty of English friends at Hyderabad. They are mostly military men."

"Probably racing and hunting people. I hope you will know their wives."

"Certainly I shall; there will be no difficulty as soon as we are in a house of our own and there is no Begum to consider."

Mr and Mrs Cunliffe looked at each other, but made no reply. The collector was relieved as well as pleased to have met Lorina outside the grounds. It showed plainly that she was no prisoner, and could at any time leave the house if she were not comfortable. Lorina went back into the cool, shaded compound, and the



great gates closed upon the dusty road, shutting her once more within the walls.

"I will adopt the English fashion, and have no gates to my compound," she said to herself, as she sauntered towards the house.

Dowluth's keen eyes swept the landscape to right and left.

"Come to the lake, sahiba," she said, in her most insinuating tones.

"Not to-day," replied Lorina.

"Better come to-day. It will rain in two or three days, and the ground here will be too wet for walking. The lake is very pretty."

"Very well," said Lorina, indifferently.

She was in no hurry to go indoors, as there were still twenty minutes till breakfast. She reached the shore of the lake by a footpath, and stood beneath a shady tree which threw its arms over the cool water. How different it was from the river at home. Here the tall pampas grass waved its white fringe in the morning breeze, in place of the sombre-tufted rush. Instead of the silvery willow, tall palms and feathery bamboos bounded the landscape on the opposite side. At the margin of the water she recognised some wading-birds; and hovering over the surface were two or three kingfishers. They were less shy than the birds of her own marsh-lands. All unmindful of her presence, the kingfishers swooped and dipped after their prey, and the long-legged waders continued their mud-dredging, running hither and thither over portions of the shore, where the shallow water was receding in consequence of the drought.

A boat shot out from the opposite side and came towards her. The rower was Mir Yacoob. After exchanging morning greetings, he said:

"This is a pleasant surprise to find you out walking. A short time ago I heard the children playing with you in the garden."

"They have gone in to breakfast, and, since then, I have been down to the big gate."

"Did the guards open it?" he asked, quickly.

"At once. I was not aware that you had a boat! will you take me for a row?"

"With pleasure."

He helped her in, and she seated herself in the stern. Dowluth watched the boat as it left the shore. She noted the heavy eyes and the worn look on the young face.

"It is just possible that it may awake," she muttered to herself, as she hurried back towards the house. She knew nothing of the power of the drugs which Major Fawcett had used. There was no fear of the madness and intoxication being revived, unless, indeed, another dose of the fatal majoon were administered.

"How delightful this is!" exclaimed Lorina.

She was glad to rest after her little walk, and she gave herself up to the enjoyment of the moment, as the boat glided over the surface of the water with a gentle ripple. Her companion made no reply. He was drinking in the peace and tranquillity of the scene; there was repose, too, in her presence; and in the calm steadfastness of the look which she turned on him. But those friendly eyes were not blind; they noted the heavy eyelids, and a certain worn expression about the mouth which she had never seen before.

"You are not well," she said, abruptly.

"I had fever last night, but I am all right now. This is not like your river in Suffolk is it?"

"No; it has a different beauty all its own."

The prince looked across the water, in which was



mirrored the luxuriant jungle; but though his glance rested on the landscape, his thoughts were far from the wood and water of his estate.

"This is Wednesday," he said, turning upon her a keen, eager eye. "Lorina, could you be ready by Monday next?"

"For the Mohammedan ceremony?"

"And for the departure."

"Oh yes; quite ready; there is nothing to wait for."

Again his eyes sought the landscape; and he seemed intent on the flight of a water-bird as it skimmed across the glassy surface, trailing its feet here and there in the water.

"What would you say if I asked you to return to England so that we might make our home there?"

She was startled, and could only reply with something like dismay in her voice.

"England instead of India?"

"Yes."

"We should defeat our purpose entirely."

"Not entirely; we should only postpone it. We could return when we chose, which would be as soon as my mother would give her consent to do what I wish."

"Is her consent necessary?"

"Absolutely; and her presence at the ceremony."

"And you can't marry without either?"

It is not in the nature of the Oriental to impart information about himself. Mir Yacoob shrank from giving the explanation which was necessary. He paused before replying, and pulled a few light strokes with the oars; the boat glided under the shade of a tuft of bamboos which leaned over the lake.

"There are different kinds of marriages amongst us.

All are equally binding and valid, but not equally honourable. The one esteemed most highly should be performed with the consent of the bridegroom's mother, and in the presence of his mother and sister. It has always been the custom to have it done so in my family, and I demand it for you. Other marriages can be made independently of relations. The contracting parties, being of age, have merely to make the contract before witnesses, and it is usually done in the presence of the kazee."

"And you say all are legal?"

"All are perfectly legal."

"And your mother consents to one but not to the other?"

"She not only consents to the one; she urges me to make it without further delay; but she is firm in her refusal to assist at the other which I desire."

Lorina remained plunged in thought. It appeared, then, that the Begum had no objection to her as a companion and wife for her son; but for some caprice or other she refused to take part in the ceremony. Probably it was because she was foreign and not of the Begum's faith. Her spirit rose in rebellion.

"Let us marry without her consent and without her presence. Why should we demand it?"

"It is reckoned of higher value in the eyes of our Mussulman world. My queen!" he cried, with sudden passion, "I would give you of the best that earth contains, but they would give you of the worst! They will drive me from them. I will leave them and adopt the country of my queen! Oh! how I long for the peace, for the gentle rest, of your father's house! Why should we not return there, and spend our days in happiness and peace?"

Lorina was silent. His eager, passionate words found



no response in her heart. Where would be all their plans for reform, their self-devotion to a noble cause, if they fled at the first check? What was gained by her marriage with a man of another race, if he cast aside all the opportunities offered by his position amongst his own people?

"I think we ought to persevere in our first intentions. It would be weak and self-indulgent to return to England. Yacoob!" her voice was earnest and purposeful. "Yacoob! you are not yourself this morning; the fever has shaken you."

She spoke gently, for all her earnestness; and, leaning forward, she laid her cool hand upon one of his as it grasped the oar. Her fingers closed firmly round his, and he felt the even pressure of the rosy palm. Looking steadfastly into his eyes, she continued:

"Courage, courage, dear friend. You are not fighting the battle single-handed; I am by your side. Have patience, and we will succeed in the end."

The touch of her hand produced a magnetic effect. It was like the hand-grasp of a man whose strong courage revived his own. Impatience and despair were vanquished; and he said softly:

"Dear lady, you are a guardian angel, a spirit of safety. I was a coward. Allah grant that we may pass safely through these troubled waters."

His lips touched her hand as she withdrew it.

"Your suggestion about our return to England is not cowardly, if we still keep our object in view. Perhaps if your mother knew that she was driving you to desperate lengths — even to the extent of adopting a far-away foreign country as your home— she might relent. Has she any suspicion of your taking such an extreme course?"

"No; it is only since I left the harem yesterday

that it suggested itself to my mind. I come here nearly every morning for a row. I like the exercise. This morning I thought of Winston, and the river, with its beauty and peace; and I longed to be back there."

"We will visit it again some day, but not until we have done our work and earned a holiday. Go to your mother this morning, and tell her to what lengths she is driving you. Tell her that the marriage must and shall take place on Monday next; and that if she refuses to be present to complete the ceremony you desire, we will have the other and return to England by the next steamer. Such a course will mean your absence, as guardian, from your sister's marriage; and perhaps the closing of the house at Hyderabad."

"She certainly would dislike to live here always. She has no friends here; whereas at Hyderabad she has plenty, and spends a good deal of time paying them calls. Yes; I might find all the arguments you suggest very powerful. The property at Hyderabad is all my own, and the only house to which she has any claim is the one she now inhabits."

"I am sorry we are reduced to using threats, but it seems the only way out of the difficulty. Now you must put me ashore, as it is breakfast-time. Dowluth has disappeared, tired of waiting, I suppose."

"I will row you to the end of the lake, which will bring you close to the house."

Lorina's words had cheered him more than a little. She had made practical suggestions, and had shown a disposition to stand her ground. He had only one misgiving—a dark, black fear which had assailed him once before. It came upon him now, as he helped her to land.



"I wish that you would accept Mrs Cunliffe's invitation, and go to her until Monday."

She turned on him with the fearless spirit of the pugnacious Briton.

"And leave you to fight your battles alone? No, no! I mean to stay here. We will leave together on Monday, having carried out our purpose triumphantly. I have no fear for our success."

He watched her with a deferential admiration as she walked firmly to the harem gate, erect and determined. He heard the imperious call to the guard, and thought what a queen she was amongst the shy, intriguing women of his own race, who trembled at the very sound of the master's voice. Was it possible that they could ever become as she was, dignified, true of purpose, courageous, and pure-minded? It was not a matter of education; it was instinctive in the race, and it could never be taught by example or precept.

Breakfast was on the table when Lorina entered, and Mrs Russel had begun hers.

"I did not wait. Lalbee told me that you had gone out walking with Dowluth beyond the harem gate. How did you persuade the conservative old woman to allow you so much liberty?"

Lorina described the change in Dowluth's manner, and recounted the details of her walk, her encounter with the Cunliffes in the road, and her row with Mir Yacoob on the lake.

"I think our action in driving to the collector's house has taught the Begum and Dowluth a lesson. They understand at last that I am not to be tied and bound by their narrow rules," concluded Lorina, as she helped herself to a slice of corned beef.

She would have liked a piece of Suffolk bacon better; but the flesh of the pig found no place in the menu

of a Mohammedan table. In her mother's house at home it had been carefully eliminated whilst Mir Yacoob was there, in deference to his prejudice.

"This is excellent bread—better than usual," said Lorina, as she ate her breakfast.

"It was sent in, with the Begum's compliments, from her own table."

"Really! Favours shower upon us this morning! Then we may suppose that Dowluth only reflects her mistress's mood, when she behaves with such amiability."

"I shall be very glad indeed if there is a better feeling shown towards us," said Mrs Russel, fervently.

When Lorina had finished, she touched a bell on the table, and went upstairs to make her morning toilette.

She emerged from her room as fresh as an English flower. She had clothed herself entirely in white, with white ribbons at her neck and waist. The only touch of colour was the gloriosa spray which she had fastened in her dress. She stood for a moment on the threshold of her room, and listened. The faint wailing of a child fell on her ear. The sound distressed her as she remembered the little one who had been punished.

It was about the time when the Begum paid her usual morning visit. Lorina ran downstairs to the sitting-room, and waited impatiently for her coming. She had not long to wait. The Begum's manner was gracious—more so than usual. Nothing was said of the sudden departure to the collector's house; and Lorina found that her efforts at conversation were not repulsed. She was heard with something like interest, and occasionally there was an intelligent response. She spoke of the games she had had with the children in the



garden, and then she began to plead for the little one in trouble. She was surprised to find that the Begum knew nothing about the matter.

"I was told that the child was punished by your order."

The Mohammedan lady looked at Dowluth for an explanation. It was made rapidly, and in a low tone. When it was finished she turned to Lorina, and said:

"The child appears to have given some trouble, and it was necessary to punish her. But she shall be restored to favour, since you ask it. I have given Dowluth directions."

Lorina expressed her gratitude.

"I have also to thank you for some very nice bread which you sent in for my breakfast this morning."

Again the Begum turned to Dowluth, who explained that she had given the order in her mistress's name. The Begum let her eyes rest thoughtfully on the woman before she replied to Lorina:

"I am glad you liked it."

The conversation was dying, even though Mrs Russel did her best to help Lorina in her efforts; and it was a relief when Mir Yacoob walked in. He was looking better. The heaviness was passing away, and his eyes were clearer. The fresh morning air, and Lorina's society, had done much to dissipate the clouds and mentally invigorate him. His mother's eyes swept over him with a keen, searching glance, in which there was some curiosity. Contrary to her usual custom, she rose immediately to depart. Mir Yacoob followed her as she left the room; and his two sisters, entering at that moment, came to Lorina's side in manifest delight at having her all to themselves.

Half-an-hour later Mir Yacoob returned. There was a smile on his face which betokened victory. Lorina left

Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm to Mrs Russel, and joined the prince.

"Well? what success have you had?"

"Complete success. My mother has agreed to assist at the full ceremony on Monday next."

"Had you to threaten to leave her?"

"I'm sorry to say I had; she was so resolute at first in her determination not to be present. I not only threatened to leave the country by the next mail, but I also told her that if she persisted in her refusal I should depart from this house this very day, and remove you to the collector's house, where the ceremony would take place without her. This seemed to shake her more than anything else. Then, to my surprise, Dowluth took up the cudgels on my behalf. She begged my mother to grant my request, saying that if it were against Allah's will, Allah himself would prevent the fulfilment of my wishes."

"Dowluth! how very odd! I should have said that her antipathy to your marriage with me was even stronger than your mother's."

"That was my opinion also; but it seems we were wrong. The woman pressed my claims and fought my battle with some spirit, till my mother gave in."

"I hope she won't retract her promise on further consideration."

"With Dowluth there, I think not. I must see the kazee, and make all the necessary arrangements. I also want your attention in this matter." He took from his pocket a furniture list. "You must tell me what you would like for your house at Hyderabad. One suite of rooms is furnished ready for us; but I told them to wait till you came for the rest—the large drawing-rooms, and some rooms above, which I thought would make good guest-chambers."



Their heads were bent over the illustrated catalogue. To be talking of furniture, velvets, tapestry, curtains, and pile carpets brought the English home very near to her. Her spirits rose; and life once more became fascinating and full of possibilities. Mir Yacoob, relieved of anxiety about the wedding ceremony, was more like his old self. The anxious look vanished from his face, and he gave himself up to the pleasure of the girl's companionship. Yet not a word of love was spoken on either side. Lorina was innocent of the feeling; and the Mohammedan knew nothing of the graceful courtship which is the charm of English betrothals, and is peculiar to the white race.

He was unwilling to go; but the morning was slipping away, and he had letters to write, visitors to receive, and business to transact connected with his estates and revenues. He gathered up the papers, on which she had made notes for his guidance with regard to the momentous question of furnishing; and, with a few words of farewell, departed.

Her eyes rested on his well-knit figure as he walked towards the harem gate. He was clothed in a suit of grey flannel, cut in the latest Bond Street style. His collar and tie were of the pattern just then in favour with young England—in fact, with his straw hat and smoothly-brushed hair, he might have been an Englishman, as far as appearances went, if it were not for the olive skin. There were few men in England who had a better claim to good looks than Mir Yacoob.

Before he reached the gate a veiled figure ran forward. Touching his feet with her right hand, she made a low salaam, bending almost to the ground. He did not return the salutation, but stood upright and unmoved. The girl lifted her hands and clasped them in an attitude of entreaty, as if she were preferring a petition. When

she had finished, Mir Yacoob spoke, whilst she stood with her head bowed. Lorina thought that she was shaken once or twice with a sob, and her curiosity was roused. When he had finished, he turned and passed through the doorway. The girl remained motionless until he had disappeared. Then she went back, by way of the garden, to the entrance used by the ayahs when they carried the children to their nursery. There could be no mistake in the identity of the girl. It was Lalbee. What could she want with Mir Yacoob?

Meanwhile the Begum, lying on her cushions, her hookah untouched, her face buried in her hands, was shaken with sobs. By her side knelt Dowluth.

"Peace, peace! beloved lady. Allah will not permit the infidel woman to live if the shahdee is performed."

The Begum slowly lifted her head. Wiping the tears away, she looked long and fixedly at Dowluth, and fathomed the sinister meaning of her words.

"No, no; not that!" she cried at last, in horror. Then, as Dowluth maintained an obstinate silence, she spoke again. "Woman, you shall not lay a finger upon her; it would kill him. Was the evil thought at the bottom of your heart when you pleaded for him?" Dowluth's manner changed like the tints of the lizard as it creeps from the grey trunk to the green foliage of the tree. A mask of virtue covered the wicked look, which had filled the Begum with momentary horror, and allayed the suspicion as quickly as it had been roused. "Ah! pardon, my handmaid; I see I was mistaken. But I was distraught with grief; for Monday's rite will be one of the saddest of my life."

"Dear mistress, I am your abject slave: I live only to do your will. I counselled you to give consent so that happiness might be the lot of him you love. Was it not ever my way when the Shahzada, your husband



and my master, willed a thing? To oppose was to madden, to acquiesce was to bring him bliss. But how often it was Allah's will that his wishes should not be attained; and the Shahzada learned that to struggle against His will was folly. So, too, will the young sahib learn submission."

Her words soothed the troubled spirit, as they had done in past days, and the Begum resigned herself to the inevitable. Not so Dowluth, however. She had preached a passive resignation which she had no intention of following. If it was Allah's will that the infidel woman should triumph, let Him show it by putting forth His protecting arm to shield her. She would need it before Monday came. If it was not His will, then might she, Dowluth, be the instrument in His hands to frustrate the infidel woman's designs.



CHAPTER VIII

A LITTLE DOMESTIC TYRANNY

A bullock needs a goad.
Boiled rice needs a chilly.
A slave needs punishment.—*Indian saying.*

LORINA returned to the drawing-room. A servant entered with a basket of gloriosa lilies which had been ordered; and she occupied herself in arranging the beautiful trails in her vases about the room. When she had finished she went upstairs to wash her fingers.

The windows were wide open. They looked towards a wing of the harem, and there was no necessity to close the venetian shutters. Lorina loved fresh air and light. She often wondered at the manner in which the other inmates of the harem so rigidly closed every shutter. It was mid-day, and the house was very still. The work of the morning was finished, the servants and dependants were gathered together over the mid-day meal, which is usually eaten by the Oriental in silence.

Lorina was about to leave her room, when her steps were arrested by a sound. It was the same cry which had disturbed her before—the faint wailing moan of a child. She had no doubt as to what it was, and her anger was roused as she realised the fact that her request concerning the child had not been granted. If the Begum had given the necessary order, as she understood was the case at the time, the order had not been obeyed. She stood listening to the cries of pain, and her annoyance grew into righteous wrath against the



woman who was causing the child to suffer. It was not to be tolerated, and she determined to put an end to it at once.

She ran her eye over the building. If her ears did not deceive her the child was in a room which was at the end of the wing. Prompt and decisive in her actions, and knowing no fear, Lorina descended the stairs. Instead of turning into the drawing-room, she followed the passage down which Dowluth usually went. Half-way down, she came to a stone staircase similar to the one which led to her own chamber. She ran lightly up to the top, and found herself in a corridor. She stopped to listen. Yes; she had guessed rightly; the wailing came from the room at the end of the corridor.

She was advancing with rapid steps towards the door, when Dowluth emerged from one of the side rooms, and barred her progress.

"What are you doing here," she asked, rudely.

"Seeing that your mistress's orders are obeyed," rejoined the girl, with some heat. "Stand aside. I want the child whom you have shut up in that room."

"Go and fetch her out yourself," returned the woman, with increasing insolence.

Lorina's blood boiled; she pushed past her with indignation, and tried to open the door. It was locked.

"Bring the key at once."

"The Beebee has the key."

"Then take me to the Beebee."

Dowluth laughed unpleasantly.

"The Beebee is eating; she is not to be disturbed for such a trifle."

By this time several women had come upon the scene. Who they were, or what offices they fulfilled in the household, Lorina could not guess. They one

and all regarded Dowluth with awe, and stared open-mouthed at the foreign lady who dared to defy her. They did not understand what was said, but they gathered a good deal from the tones of the speakers.

In vain Lorina argued and issued orders; Dowluth refused obstinately to produce the key; she refused also to lead the way to her mistress's room in the other wing. The child should not be released, she avowed, until the mother, who had come once more unbidden, had departed, or there would be fresh trouble. The mother had been told that so long as she remained crying near the house and calling for her child, so long should the child remain in punishment.

"It is monstrous," cried Lorina.

"Perhaps you would like to speak with the mother; but it will be like talking to a tiger. If you can persuade her to go, I will bring out the child," said Dowluth, with a disagreeable smile.

"Where is the mother?"

"She wails by the kitchens. If you listen, you can hear her cries."

Above the feeble moaning which came at intervals from the room, Lorina could distinguish another cry, stronger and more poignant. It made her sick to listen. She would have liked to have torn the fiend before her in pieces in her impotent anger. This morning the woman had been so smooth-tongued and amiable; now she was a demon of tyranny.

But Lorina had already learnt a lesson in the harem. She controlled herself, with a sudden recollection of what she was about, and said, with a calmness and indifference which she was far from feeling:

"As you tell me that you are acting under the orders of the Beebee"—Dowluth had made no such statement, but she was well pleased that the English lady should



have that impression—"I suppose I must leave it for the present. After lunch I will see the Beebee myself, and the child shall be released."

"Is it her crying that disturbs you? We allow her to cry so that her mother may hear her."

Lorina's anger flashed out again, in spite of the control she was putting upon herself.

"No; it is not that I am disturbed, it is your wicked cruelty in making two people suffer in this way," she said.

Dowluth gave a disagreeable grunt.

"Punishment is necessary amongst these people sometimes, or they would become unmanageable."

Lorina turned away from the hateful old woman, and went to her room. She had no intention of being so easily defeated; but her next move was not one which she wished the enemy to see. She put on her sun-hat, and took up her white umbrella with its double cover. As she left her room, she listened. The wailing had ceased; but the distant cry of the mother on the other side of the wing was audible, now that she had had her attention drawn to it. She slipped downstairs without meeting any of the household. It was evident that their suspicions had not been roused. A moment later she stood before the harem door. A call brought out the guard and the two women.

"Open!" she said.

The man hesitated; but at a second word of command he signed to the woman who carried the key, and the door swung open. The guard said a few words to the second woman, and she followed Lorina, the door closing swiftly behind her.

"Watched, as usual," thought Lorina, as she hurried round to the front of Mir Yacoob's house. She felt no trepidation in entering thus, uninvited and un-



expected. Her faith in the man was such that she had no doubt of her reception. She passed under the wide portico, and a peon came forward at the sound of her footstep. She knew enough of the language to be able to state her wants.

"Where is your master?"

"He is in the Durbar Hall, sahiba."

"Lead me to him."

It was a relief not to meet the questioning hesitation which proved so irritating in the harem. The man led the way without a moment's hesitation. They passed through two ante-rooms and entered a large salon which opened into a wide pillared hall. The walls of the hall were ornamented with arabesque patterns in gold, chocolate, and red. Seats covered with red velvet were arranged in arched alcoves. Handsome tapestry curtains were draped in each arch above the seats; and between the alcoves were stands of arms, bright and burnished with careful rubbing. The roof was of carved wood, and from the massive beams hung lanterns of coloured glass.

At the end of the hall was a dais raised by three steps above the level of the floor. It was covered with Persian carpet; and was furnished with some handsome gilded chairs and a marble-topped table. Upon the dais were seated two Mohammedan gentlemen. At the moment of Lorina's entry they were deep in earnest conversation, and they did not observe that she was approaching.

One of them was in the full dress of his country. He wore a long crimson and gold brocaded coat which reached to his feet. It was a regal garment such as one of the kings of Assyria might have worn. Below it peeped the white satin trousers of the Mohammedan gentleman, and a pair of patent leather boots. His



turban was adorned with a magnificent diamond star; on his wrists and neck sparkled gemmed bracelets and a necklace worth several lacs of rupees. A jewelled sword was placed on the table by his side.

The other, an older man, was attired in a simpler dress of white muslin, finely embroidered, a white turban, and no jewels.

It was not until Lorina approached to within ten yards of the dais that she recognised in the younger man Mir Yacoob. She had never seen him in anything but European clothes. His dignified appearance in his native costume impressed her; she looked at him with unconscious admiration and approval. She swept up the steps towards him with the assurance and grace of a queen, which the second Mohammedan observed with wonder. The presence of a lady of his own nation in the Durbar Hall would have been a lifelong disgrace to her, and sufficient cause for divorce. But this strange foreign woman came to them as though she were stooping to confer a favour; and, what was more, the prince was receiving her in that same spirit.

He left his seat, and gave her his hand, leading her up the steps with a deference which might have been shown to the Nizam himself. He pushed his own chair forward for her; she sank into it, whilst he stood by her side waiting for her to speak.

"Introduce me to your friend," she said.

Mir Yacoob did as she asked, using her maiden name. In English he said:

"This is the kazee who is to marry us."

She gazed at him with interest, and extended her hand. The astonished kazee took it, and bent low over it. He could scarcely conceal his curiosity and surprise, though his good breeding as an Oriental forbade him to show any emotion in the presence of

the prince. Then she turned to Mir Yacoob, who was waiting with no little anxiety to hear why she had thus come to him so suddenly and unexpectedly. It must be something of momentous importance to cause her to take such a step without warning him. At the first sight of her he had been almost disconcerted.

"There is nothing wrong in the harem, I hope," he queried, with an eagerness he could not hide.

"Nothing wrong with myself."

She poured forth the tale of Dowluth's iniquity, and Mir Yacoob gave a sigh of relief as he listened.

"And you want my help to rescue your little favourite?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried, rising from her chair.

"What! in full dress as I am? Need the king wear his robes to crush a black beetle?"

He beckoned to the old Mussulman peon who stood in the hall, and gave him instructions in a low voice to admit no one until the lady had gone. Lorina did not hear his words; she was too full of her own affairs.

"Yes, come as you are; it won't take long. I want the child liberated at once, and I am sure that you are the only person who can do it. Dowluth over-rules your mother, and does just as she likes in the house; she is a dreadful old tyrant."

"I'm afraid my mother doesn't care sufficiently about these matters. The management of the domestics is left entirely to Dowluth, and the woman becomes overbearing. I can come with you now if you won't keep me long. In a short time I am expecting some gentlemen, which is the reason why you find me here in full dress."

Lorina bowed courteously to the kazee, and led the way back, thereby subverting the time-honoured custom of the East of the woman following the man. The



worthy magistrate gazed open-mouthed at the novel sight of a husband following his wife — and that husband a prince. It was marvellous, unheard of; but she was very beautiful, and she would bear him strong children. Allah grant that they might be faithful followers of the Prophet.

Mir Yacoob and Lorina walked quickly to the harem. The woman who had shadowed Lorina preceded them, and the door opened at their appearance. Frightened glances were cast by the guard towards the master in his durbar robes; and there was whispered comment behind his back, as they watched him disappear within the house.

Lorina went straight to the room where the child was confined. Dowluth in abject terror crept forth from one of the adjacent rooms, and greeted the English lady in a very different manner from that which she had adopted half-an-hour ago. The memory of yesterday's encounter was still fresh in her mind, and she shrank from the prince like a dog that has felt the whip. She had never dreamt, when she defied Lorina, that she possessed such a power over the master as to bring him to her at any hour she pleased. The power of the Begum was as nothing compared with hers. It was the witchery of a devil to draw him thus from the Durbar Hall, in his robes of state, to fulfil a trifling fancy such as this. With trembling fingers she took the key from her waist, and, unlocking the door, threw it open.

The sight which met Lorina's eyes drew from her a sharp cry of anger, and the colour left her cheek—a fact that did not escape Mir Yacoob's watchful eye. The little girl was tied by the wrists, and was hanging from a couple of nails in the wall. The cords which bound her, cut into the shining, black skin, and crimson

blood dripped down from her plump black arms. Her bare back was marked with weals made by the cruel rattan, two of them being red, open wounds, from which also the blood ran. The child's head hung on one side, as though merciful unconsciousness had come to relieve her suffering.

"Poor little dear! she is dead!" cried Lorina, as she ran to her and lifted the bruised body from its cruel position.

She looked into the child's face, and another exclamation of anger escaped her lips. The pitiful wailing had been silenced by means of a gag. It was the work of a moment to remove it. A moan from the victim proclaimed that she was alive. The child opened her eyes, and, recognising the kind English lady, feebly nestled in her protecting arms. Tears stood in Lorina's eyes as she lifted them to Mir Yacoob.

"Dowluth ought to be sent away, banished from the harem. How can your mother keep such a monster?"

"I can't send her away. I have no power over the management of the household. But I can threaten her with something she won't like," he said, in a low tone, as he bent his glance on the woman.

She was cowering on her knees outside the room, and she trembled visibly at his approach. The other women, who had assembled round her, were also shaking with fear, and their dark faces took dull ochre tints. Only a generation or two ago the master would have slain them where they stood, and no one would have guessed outside the harem the tragedy enacted within. But Mir Yacoob had control over himself to-day. He spoke to Dowluth in stern tones which were new to Lorina. She had never seen him so angry before. He was angry at such a wanton piece of barbarity being



perpetrated in the house; and he was still more enraged at the pain to which Lorina had been put. Behind all this there was the memory of the outrage which had been committed on himself the day before, of which Lorina knew nothing.

They left the room, taking the child with them. Dowluth, in tears, was prostrated on the ground with her women about her. They, too, had heard his words; and consternation was written on each face. If the prince carried out his threat Dowluth would be disgraced and removed from them for ever; a matter over which they might have rejoiced, if they had not possessed the inherited instincts of generations of slaves.

"I threatened the old woman with the police. She fears that more than anything else. I have no power to turn her out of the harem; but, if you wish her to be removed, I can do it by informing against her."

"We will talk it over by-and-by," replied Lorina.

"Now I must go back to the Durbar Hall, as I expect my guests are already there. I will come in after your lunch, and see if your orders have been carried out. Here, Cassim."

The fat server waddled towards him, in mortal dread lest he too should come under his master's wrath; for the news of Dowluth's discomfiture had already spread.

"Whatever the English lady asks you to do, do it. You understand?"

Cassim salaamed low with many protestations. He understood more than the words implied; he knew that to disobey might mean the loss of his soft place in the harem, and the necessity of earning his bread by the sweat of his brow. Although the Begum might save Dowluth, her handmaid, she would care nothing at all for his fate; his place might easily be filled by another.

The prince looked at the child, which had just been taken from Lorina by Mrs Russel.

"I think the little one is recovering. Give the woman a present when you hand over the child. You have some money, Lorina?"

"Yes, plenty. Thanks so much for what you have done. You are good indeed!"

"I am very glad to help you in putting down such a gross piece of cruelty. I wish my mother would interest herself in these matters," he sighed. "If you want me at any time, don't scruple to send for me. I am always at your service; you come before all else in my life."

His eyes seemed to have in them a look of reproach, and she said apologetically:

"I came to you myself, as I feared to trust a message with any servant."

"I understand. The harem is teaching you its sad lesson of distrust, as it has taught others. Sometimes I despair of setting things straight even in my own household."

He hurried away to the Durbar, and Lorina returned to the child. It was lying on Mrs Russel's lap; she was employed in dressing the wounds and rubbing the stiffening arms which had supported the body so long.

"I am sorry this has happened," remarked Mrs Russel.

"I am sorry for the child; but I am very glad indeed that Dowluth has been made to understand that her word is not law."

"This morning I began to hope that matters were becoming smoother," continued Mrs Russel. "Now there will be friction again, and the Begum will be annoyed. We mustn't forget that this is her house."



"It doesn't matter whose house it is. Such cruelty is not to be permitted," replied Lorina, warmly.

"Of course I understand that," Mrs Russel hastened to say. "What I mean is, that I am sorry that it was necessary to call in Mir Yacoob. I am afraid the Begum won't like it."

"I don't care if she does object. I gave her the opportunity of setting matters right this morning."

"Believe me, Lorina, it is playing with fire to interfere in domestic matters in a household like this."

Mrs Russel spoke with an earnestness which was solemn; but it did not impress her hearer. The girl laughed with genuine amusement.

"That is what I have come out for, and I am only at the beginning of the campaign," she cried.

Mrs Russel looked so distressed that Lorina grew serious again. They were still ministering to the little bruised body, with gentle touch and healing salve.

"What do you fear? You fear something, I am sure."

"I fear that you have made an enemy of Dowluth; and you have lost the ground you gained with the Begum, by your action this afternoon. You should have gone to the Begum to get the child released."

Lorina got up from her knees.

"After all, it doesn't much matter if the old lady is angry. I shall not be here much longer. Now I am going to call the mother. How pleased she will be to have her child back again?"

There was no further difficulty in securing the execution of her orders. Cassim gesticulated and scolded, and the frightened women ran to do her bidding on the instant. Dowluth was not to be seen, and her presence was not required.

The woman, a pariah from one of the villages belong-

ing to Mir Yacoob, was a forlorn-looking object. Her face was swollen with unrestrained weeping; her hair was dishevelled and full of dust, which, in the abandonment of grief, she had thrown upon her head; the poor thin cotton cloth was torn and disordered. She was terribly alarmed when she received a summons to go into the presence of the lady. She could scarcely be persuaded to move. Cassim gave but short time for reflection, for the English lady had now to be obeyed at all costs. He seized her arm, and hurried her along to the front of the house, where Lorina was waiting in the verandah.

At sight of the lady the poor creature fell upon her knees and touched the ground with her forehead, her hands folded in supplication. It was with the greatest difficulty that she could be persuaded to stand up and listen to what the strange lady had to say. The woman did not speak the language of the harem, so Cassim had to translate and explain in the village vernacular. When the mother at last understood that she was to be allowed to see her child, and not only see it but take it away with her, her joy was as extravagant and uncontrolled as her grief.

Mrs Russel brought out the little girl, who had revived considerably. When she saw her mother, she held out her arms and laughed. The woman ran towards her with tigerish impetuosity, and snatched her away from Mrs Russel. Hugging her child closely, she retreated with the jealous instinct of an animal that fears to be robbed of its cubs. Yet it was but a year ago that she had entreated Dowluth to take the little one and "be a father and mother to it."

"Call the woman back," said Mrs Russel.

Cassim had even greater trouble in persuading her to return than he had experienced in bringing her to the

verandah. She showed a dread least the great lady should repent of her generosity, and demand the child back. When she arrived once more within speaking distance, Mrs Russel asked, through Cassim, whether any of the other mothers wished to see their children and claim them again. The woman replied in the negative. Then why had she asked for her little one? Because the sickness —(cholera is never named amongst them, except vaguely as "the sickness")—had taken all her other children, and this was the only one left. The other women had large families, and did not want their girls; they already found it difficult to feed the sons who were left; times were bad, and food was very dear.

The woman cast furtive glances towards the door of the harem. Lorina saw that she was uneasy and anxious to escape; she advanced to place some rupees in her hand. With a startled cry the poor creature prepared to retreat out of reach again. The girl stopped and held out the rupees. In a moment the expression on the mother's face changed, and she came forward with restored confidence. Lorina placed the silver in the lap of the child, an action which the woman quite understood.

But even this mark of favour did not dissipate the suspicion that still lurked in her mind. At the word of dismissal from Cassim she scudded to the door of the harem, through which she passed, casting fearful glances behind her, lest Dowluth should appear and demand the child back. Not until she was out in the open fields—where the black goats browsed and the kites screamed overhead, where the cactus grew by sandy nullah, and the gloriosa spread its blossoms in the sun—did she feel secure.

"Now, if that woman had been English what a row we should have had, and what a threatening of police

there would have been!" said Lorina, as they sat down to lunch.

"No English woman would have parted with her child under such conditions as this one accepted. Shall I cut you a piece of this roll?"

Mrs Russel helped herself and Lorina to some of the excellent white bread with which the table had been supplied.

"Then the mothers know that they are selling their children into slavery?"

"They must be aware of the fact."

After lunch Mir Yacoob—once more in his quiet Western dress—came in. As he sat there Dowluth appeared, looking the incarnation of penitence and humility. She expressed her sorrow for what had happened, and promised amendment. But she did not attempt to excuse her conduct. She seemed to think that her chief fault lay in the fact that she had resisted Lorina. She begged forgiveness, and entreated the prince not to complain of her to the Beebee, nor to let her mistress know that he had threatened to violate the gosha of the harem by bringing in the police. It was the one thing for which the Beebee would not forgive her. Hitherto she had always managed the household without reproach. It would be a terrible thing in her old age to bring such a disgrace upon the house. Mir Yacoob listened in silence to the appeal, and looked at Lorina.

"What shall we do about it? Command me, dear lady, and I will execute your wishes."

Dowluth prostrated herself before the girl, who smiled as she thought how completely the old woman had been subdued. Pardon was granted, with an assurance that the Begum should not be told. She was not allowed to depart without a warning that



there must be no repetition of violence towards any members of the household, from the highest to the lowest. As Mir Yacoob said this he laid an emphasis on the word highest: he remembered the outrage offered to himself the day before. Dowluth understood what was meant, and, as far as the sahib himself was concerned, it was unlikely that she would attempt to interfere with his well-being again in a hurry; for the marks of his fingers still lingered round her throat. When she was gone, Lorina asked:

"How are matters progressing with the kazee?"

"Excellently well. We have arranged all the details for Monday. I hope you won't find them tedious; I am afraid they will occupy a great part of the day. We shall leave by the evening train, and be at Hyderabad on the following evening."

"I should like to ask Mrs Cunliffe to be present."

They discussed other matters in connection with the wedding, and he explained what ceremonies would be performed. She was to wear a white bridal costume, such as an English bride would adopt at home, with orange flowers and veil, all of which were prepared and ready.

Dowluth, and the many attendant annoyances connected with her, were forgotten in the contemplation of the approaching wedding. The opposition which had been experienced in the harem added a peculiar zest to the triumph of the hour. Lorina felt that she had overcome every difficulty, and was about to attain success. Her spirits rose, and there was a deep undercurrent of excitement which she could not hide. It took the place of the bliss which every bride should feel in the fulfilment of her love-dream, and it deceived them both. She was beguiled into thinking that the dearest wish of her life was obtained. As Mrs Cunliffe

had said, she was in love with the idea. But if Edith had been here to question, Lorina would have replied, unhesitatingly, that she loved the man and not the idea—loved him as much as it was in her unsentimental nature to love anyone.

The man himself was worthy of her love: reliable, courteous, a chivalrous gentleman, in whose keeping her happiness would be safe. Her heart warmed towards him as her clear, steady eyes met his. She felt the bonds of gratitude and friendship; but, above all, those mysterious links which bind workers together in a field of labour, where difficulties have to be overcome, and battles fought out side by side. In the hour of victory, the victors turn to each other in silent but supreme sympathy.

Four o'clock struck, and the prince rose to his feet.

"I have a pleasant surprise for you." He watched for the sparkle of pleasure which would shine from her eyes when she heard his news; and he was not disappointed. "I have found a horse at last which will carry you."

"You have!" she cried, with a look that made his heart beat. It was the look with which women reward men who fulfil the dearest wishes of their hearts.

"I was determined not to be beaten, though you were good enough to say that you would wait. It is a perfect animal, worthy of its mistress."

He smiled as he paid her the compliment. He was not often guilty of commonplace little compliments like this.

"When can I try it?"

"Now, if you like—that is to say, as soon as you get ready. I told the syce to have it saddled by four, and the gong has struck the hour."

Only those who have an inherited love of horse-flesh,



and have, so to speak, been born to the saddle, know the intense pleasure of feeling a horse bounding beneath them again after a long deprivation. To Lorina, already excited by the events of the day, it seemed that with this gift her cup of happiness was full. She laid her hands on his shoulders, as he stood there before her, and said:

"How am I to thank you, Yacoob?"

Under a sudden impulse, born of the touch of her hands, he leaned forward and kissed her, with the courtliness and grace of an English gentleman.

"By giving me this privilege, dear lady."

There was no shy dropping of the head, nor signs of sweet confusion, although the colour of her cheek deepened slightly as she received the salutation. She was calm and self-possessed.

But the man's whole being was electrified as he felt his kiss returned, affectionately, gratefully, almost heartily. It was just such a kiss as St George might have received had he rendered his sister some acceptable service, a sisterly salutation, free from any sort of passion. The touch of her lips acted like fire upon the sensitive nature of the Oriental, and raised within his breast a storm of emotion; it would have resulted in a passionate declaration of his love, had she not withdrawn from his arms before he had time to express his feelings in words. The waiting horse, not the passionate lover, engrossed her thoughts. Even as he still stood—thrilled, transfixed, his breath coming in quick gasps, his brow burning, his whole soul concentrated on the moment—she was bounding up the stairs, intent only on leaping once more into the saddle. An English lover would have caught her, and detained her with gentle force, till she had listened to his love. But Mir Yacoob "feared to tread." The time would soon come

when he would have a right to express his love. How heavily the time dragged! Only a few more days: but it seemed an age. Like a man in a dream, he passed out of the harem.

"O light of my eyes! Sweet rose of my heart! would that these days of weary waiting were over, and that you were safe in my keeping!"



CHAPTER IX

THE DEAD BIRD

"Give the snake milk, but you will only get poison."
Tamil proverb.

THE breakfast-table was spread under the tamarind-trees, and a youthful server, about twelve years old, was stationed near to keep off the crows. These bold birds, the incarnation of all the wickedness of bird life, made dashes at the fruit and would soon have cleared the table except for the child's rattan cane. Lalbee entered the garden, and approached with a smile on her face. She pretended not to see Dowluth in the act of sneaking away through the guava bushes. The old woman was under the impression that her presence was not detected, whereas Lalbee had been watching her movements for the last ten minutes from behind one of the venetian shutters of the house.

"Shoo! drive the birds away, Annamal. You are slow and stupid. See those two there behind you, they will have the cakes before your very eyes!"

The child turned to pursue the marauders, and ran down the garden shouting vengeance and flourishing her stick. No sooner had she turned her back than Lalbee, quick as thought, emptied the contents of one of the plates into her lap and substituted something else in the place of the cakes. When the child returned, breathless and panting, Lalbee took her turn at the crows, and followed a black, raven-like bird that

hopped before her with the tameness of a barnyard fowl. She chased it to the edge of the garden, where it rose on its wings and flew over the wall. She threw something after it upon which it swooped with a greedy caw. At that moment Lorina issued from the house, buoyant and joyous in the anticipation of another ride.

The ride on the previous evening had been a great pleasure both to herself and her companion. The horse was all that Mir Yacoob had described it, perfect in its paces; and they enjoyed a delightful gallop under the avenues of old trees that lined the roads. Having gained her liberty, there was less likelihood now that any trickery would be played; and she had little fear that the animal would go lame or meet with any accident.

Lorina went to the breakfast-table at once; and, seeing that she had not yet had her morning meal, Lalbee, with innate delicacy, moved away amongst the oleanders, seeking that part of the house from which her children would presently issue. Lorina signed to the little maid to go; the table was quite safe from the raiders now that she had come. She helped herself to some crisp toast and fresh butter.

It was a tempting little meal, with an abundance of fruit—bananas, pomegranates, custard-apples, oranges, and a pine-apple, besides the customary toast, butter, and marmalade. There was also a plate of rice-cakes, known in the Madras Presidency as appas.

They are made of rice-flour and cocoa-nut-milk, and are called hoppers by Anglo-Indians. Those which the Mohammedans love best have the appearance of vermicelli. They constitute the early morning meal for rich and poor alike, and are taken plain, with a cup of sweet coffee or tea. Lorina had expressed a



desire for some, having tasted them once before; and she was pleased to find them on the table this morning.

She was not left long at her solitary meal. Dowluth, humble and abject, and wearing the nearest approach to an angelic smile which it was possible to attain, came to give the English lady greeting. Speech with the old woman was always easy on account of her knowledge of English. When she was amiable she could be very interesting. She made a low salaam, and asked if she were forgiven. Lorina reassured her on that point; and to show that the forgiveness was complete, began to talk to her as she ate her breakfast.

"You see I have some appas this morning. Do they come from the Begum?"

"They were made in the Begum's kitchen, and are the same as those she eats herself. I learnt that you wished to have some sent to your table, so I told your servant to fetch them from our kitchen," said Dowluth.

"That was very kind of you," replied Lorina, as she helped herself to one.

"The English ladies at the mission school where I was taught, always ate them with cream and sugar, or cream and jam. They had them every morning for their early breakfast."

The suggestion commended itself to Lorina, who acted upon it, and found the appas excellent when so treated. Dowluth watched the girl's enjoyment of the delicacies with interest. Perhaps she hoped that good eating would promote good feeling; it never failed to do so amongst her own people, whose favours might generally be bought by ministering to their carnal appetites. The first appa was so excellent

that Lorina took another. When that was finished she turned her attention to the custard-apples. But here Dowluth interposed with pretentious anxiety for her welfare, an anxiety she was far from feeling.

"Custard-apples are not wholesome to eat; they bring the sickness. Try the plantains, sahiba; they are more wholesome."

"I ate two custard-apples yesterday, and they did me no harm."

She took one on her fruit plate and broke it open. In five minutes she had disposed of its luscious custardy pulp. As she put down her spoon, Lalbee and her children appeared. The little ones raced towards her. followed by their black attendants. The place of the child who had been restored to its mother was already filled by another, who was puffed up with infantile pride at her promotion and her new clothes. Lorina held out her arms and caught little Zara. She lifted her into her lap as she sat at the table. Zara's glance turned upon the remains of the breakfast.

"Ah! I see greedy eyes upon the appas," cried Lorina.

She put one of them into her hands, and the child lost no time in tasting it. A cry from Dowluth startled the group. The old woman darted forward and snatched the cake away angrily. Not content with this she put her finger in Zara's mouth, and extracted the piece which had been bitten off and was in a fair way to descend the throat. It was much as if an old hen-wife had taken a grain of Indian corn from a greedy chicken's gullet. The action was comical, for the child made odd grimaces of disgust, and Lorina burst into a fit of laughter. Lalbee caught the infection, and joined in the merriment, but she seemed quite as much amused at Dowluth's horror and con-



sternation, as she was at her little daughter's grimaces. With a sparkle of something which looked uncommonly like mischief in her eye, Lalbee reached out her hand to take the last two appas in the dish. But Dowluth was too quick for her. She snatched at the cakes, broke them in pieces and threw them to the ground.

"Do you want to make the children ill? They have already had appas this morning, and are not to have any more."

She cast a furious glance at Lalbee, who was not in the least alarmed, but was still shaking with laughter as she bent over Zara. The disgorging process had been too much for the child, and she showed signs of being violently ill, which only increased Dowluth's agitation. Lorina patted Zara on the back and gave her some water to drink, whilst the old woman continued to scold at the careless young mother. But the more she rated her, the more Lalbee laughed; till the children themselves caught the infection and joined in the merriment.

When Zara had recovered, the usual games began. There was no sun; a grey pall of light vapour covered the sky, indicating that the rain, so much needed, was coming. The little people had no occasion to remain in the shade. They romped and raced with their companions amongst the garden beds, Lorina and Lalbee after them, and Dowluth looking on. Before long they were by the side of the tank, once more peeping down at the opening to the mysterious passage, which led to the jin-haunted jewel-chamber. Quivering with excitement the children begged Lorina to go down and brave the dread jin. She ran to the bottom and looked up at them. The children expected her to return immediately; but, instead of doing so, they saw her enter the passage. As the last trace of her

white skirts disappeared their laughter was silenced, and they stood with bated breath watching for her return. Even Lalbee could not repress a little cry of dismay; whilst Dowluth looked on with a curiosity which was intense. After some seconds Lorina burst forth from the passage, and was once more safe at their side.

"What did you see?" asked Lalbee, her eyes round with as great a wonder as that of her little daughters.

"I saw a jin with eyes as big as saucers," replied Lorina, recollecting a familiar old fairy-tale.

"Oh! weren't you frightened?" cried Zara.

"No."

"Go again," said the child, her eyes bright with excitement.

Lorina descended the steps, making several feints of turning back. Listening, advancing, retreating and advancing again, she acted a part which kept her audience spell-bound, from the youngest to the oldest. Arrived once more at the bottom, she entered the passage. Her own curiosity was aroused now, and she wanted to see if the jewel-chamber was a reality. The light penetrated some distance from the opening. After her eyes had got used to the semi-darkness, she made her way cautiously along the stone causeway. She looked along the floor and walls for signs of a snake, the only reptile she feared; but she saw nothing more than a harmless lizard or two. From the arched roof, where the rough stone or the penetrating roots of trees gave foothold, some bats were hanging down. A squirrel on the stone coping at the spring of the arch screeched to warn its mate that an enemy was in sight.

Ten yards from the entrance, the passage, which was also intended as a culvert for conveying water



from one tank to another, was barred by a heavy sluice-door. It was raised by means of strong chains attached to the wheel above ground. Its purpose was to regulate the flow of water one way or the other, Lorina could not tell which. The door was raised some four feet, and it was easy to pass underneath it. She went a few steps farther, and, to her astonishment and delight, came upon a few stone stairs branching to the left which led into a little chamber. A faint light from a small opening above shone down into the room; it would be easy to enter, and if there were jewels, to bring them away.

She was about to mount the steps and explore the treasure-room, when she heard the cries of Lalbee and the children. She was so absorbed in her explorations that she had taken no note of how the time passed. They were real cries of alarm that fell faintly on her ear; and, remembering that her object was to amuse the little ones, not to alarm them, she hurried back without penetrating farther down the passage, or going into the treasure-chamber. To her surprise and consternation she found all the party in tears, except Dowluth.

"Ah! you shall not go again," cried Lalbee, catching her by the arm.

"We thought the jins had shut you up," sobbed Zara.

"But see, I am safe! The jins all flew away when they saw the English sahiba coming."

Lorina wiped their tears, comforted and consoled them, till their smiles came back again. "See, there's a butterfly; let's catch it!"

Away she flew, followed by the children; and happy voices once more rang through the garden. The time came for the play to cease. The children were carried

off to the nursery, and Lalbee accompanied them. Lorina went into the house, and the garden was deserted, except for Dowluth, who remained by the tank. It seemed to possess a new fascination for her that morning. Yet she did not venture down the steps as Lorina had done. Once she stole round to where the ventilator reared its chimney-like head, and stood for a moment at the windlass, which revolved by means of a wheel and supported the heavy sluice-door. From the tank she moved towards the house, casting a keen glance at the sky. As she passed into the verandah at the back of the harem she muttered to herself:

"To-morrow the rain will come, and the water will cover all. If the Shaitan cheats us to-day, Allah will not disappoint us to-morrow."

The later breakfast was over, as was also the refreshing bath, and Lorina arranged the sitting-room to her liking. A comfortable chair was pushed into a cool corner for Mrs Russel, and her book and work placed on a table near at hand. Mrs Russel was grateful for the countless little acts of kindness and courtesy which Lorina performed. The girl, with her generous and open nature, unconsciously won her way to the heart of the lonely widow. Indeed, it was impossible to live with Lorina without loving her. When Mrs Russel thought of the future, she was conscious of a deep regret. Even now that she saw her so happy at the approaching fulfilment of her desires, the good lady sighed.

After seeing to Mrs Russel's comfort, Lorina went into the verandah. If any one had accused her of watching for the coming of her lover, she would have denied the imputation. But it was the hour when he might be expected; and, whether she chose to



admit it or not, her eyes frequently turned towards the harem gate. A soft cooing of voices in the room behind warned her that Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm had come to pay her their usual morning visit.

"Where is your mother?" asked Mrs Russel, seeing that the girls were unaccompanied.

They explained that the Begum was not coming down this morning; but they made no excuse for her absence, and offered no apology. Lorina expressed a hope that she was not ill, at which the girls looked astonished. Their mother was quite well; why should, she suppose otherwise? They brought out their work and set themselves to ply their needles with all the absorbing eagerness of children. Whilst they were so employed Dowluth came in. She glanced keenly at Lorina, who was bending over a piece of embroidery, fully occupied in disentangling the sewing silk from a troublesome knot. Mrs Russel caught her eye, and asked if all was well with the Begum. Dowluth replied that she was quite well. Mrs Russel went on to inquire politely after the health of the children collectively, anticipating the same reply. But it did not come. After a slight hesitation the old woman said that Zara was not quite herself. The child had eaten too much; she was a greedy little thing, and it was not good to indulge her. Her mother and the English lady were very unwise to give her food from the breakfast-table in the garden. This was said in an emphatic tone, indicating anxiety which was not yet allayed. As a matter of fact, Zara's temporary indisposition had been solely due to Dowluth's rough treatment of her.

"Perhaps the child has been running about too much and has over-excited herself," said Mrs Russel.

She was aware of the quiet, monotonous life led by



the children of the harem, and she had heard the tale of their grief at Lorina's disappearance down the dark passage.

"It might be so," replied the Begum's faithful handmaid, moodily.

She loved the little girls as though they were her own, and watched over them with the jealous care of a grandmother. A footstep in the verandah warned them of the approach of Mir Yacoob. The effects of his illness had entirely passed away; his eyes were clear and bright again, and the look of anxiety had disappeared from his brow. He glanced round the room, and at once detected the absence of the Begum.

"Has my mother been to see you this morning?" he asked of Lorina.

"No; and she is not coming, I believe." She rose from her seat and withdrew from the girls. "I hope there is no new phase of opposition, no fresh difficulty raised this morning."

"It is unlikely," he replied, reassuringly.

"If there is, remember that I am determined to go through the ceremony on Monday, whether your mother is present or not," she said, with a decision that was music in his ear.

"I will see her at once, and set your mind at rest on that point. But I have no fear of further opposition," he added, with a happy smile.

She smiled back at him brightly and hopefully.

"I feel very much as if the battle had been fought and won. The enemy has surrendered, and we may make our own terms." As she spoke she caught sight of Dowluth. "That old woman is watching me again! I wonder what she has in her mind."

"Curiosity. She wants to see how my bride behaves before her wedding-day. Lorina, I don't think you



know how interesting and how novel you are to my people. You are full of sweet surprises even to myself."

He was thinking of yesterday, and how she had thanked him for the gift of the horse.

"I am afraid they take me for a bold young woman; but they will get used to me in time," she replied, as she went back to Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm.

He returned in half-an-hour, and Lorina read in a single glance a favourable report of his visit.

"My mother was charming this morning. I am satisfied, at last, that she is reconciled to the marriage. Besides talking about that subject, we discussed her plans for the future. She wishes to return to Hyderabad, to the house which I have always put at her service. It is entirely separated from the one which we shall occupy; and there is no reason why she should not do as she wishes."

"None whatever," Lorina replied.

She was not afraid of interference and opposition when once she had a house of her own. She and her husband would be a tower of strength against all the intrigues of the harem. After a little further conversation Mir Yacoob excused himself, saying that he had letters to write.

"You will ride with me this afternoon, I hope?"

"With pleasure," replied Lorina.

"I will send the horse to the door at half-past four."

He made farewell salaams to his sisters, and departed. The girls remained a little longer, and then rose to go. Lorina asked them if they knew that their brother's marriage with herself would take place on the Monday following. They had not heard the news, and they were full of eager questions as to the details.

"Are we to be permitted to take part in it?" asked Shahjee.

"Yes, certainly," replied Lorina.

Shahjee gazed at Noor-i-Chasm with delight.

"Then we shall hold the veil. Oh! how nervous I shall be.

Lorina laughed.

"As you did at the doll's wedding? No, I think not; because I shall wear my veil on my head, according to the English custom."

Their faces fell; then Noor-i-Chasm said, timidly:

"But this is not an English wedding; you will be a Mohammedan bride on Monday."

Shahjee took up the tale, and continued:

"And so the veil must be held by us between you It must be the silk curtain which always hides the bride from her husband, and which we lower at our pleasure. It is such fun to tease the bridegroom. We won't let him see you till he has given you some handsome presents. It is like a game of play. He ties a ring or a bangle to a flower, and tosses it over the veil into your lap, as you saw; and you return him sweetmeats as thanks, for you must not speak. At last, when his pockets are empty and his patience is quite exhausted, we lower the veil."

"That is how Shahjee will first see her husband," said Noor-i-Chasm.

"Oh, I hope he won't be old and ugly! Dowluth has seen him, and she says that he is as beautiful as the sun at its rising," exclaimed Shahjee.

"Yes; I saw your use of the veil at the doll's wedding. It is a very pretty custom; but I prefer to wear mine on my head."

She kissed them both, and they returned her kisses gently on her cheek, calling her "sister," and invoking blessings on her in their own language. "May Allah preserve you, sweet sister, and keep your heart cool," they chorused, like two gentle doves.



Lorina thanked them, and said:

"You must tell Lalbee the good news. I did not mention it this morning."

"Ah, poor Lalbee! she has no husband," sighed Shahjee.

"But it is Allah's will," said Noor-i-Chasm.

"Lalbee's husband will return to her one day. She must not fret. Tell her that she is to hope for the best. After my marriage I will speak to your brother about her."

"You will! Oh, that will be kind and good of you!"

Again the soft cooing voices invoked the blessing of Allah upon her, and they departed, full of pleasant anticipation of the coming festivities.

"That is a pretty idea of the veil and its use," Lorina remarked to Mrs Russel.

"I believe it is a very great honour to have the veil held by the bridegroom's sisters. Probably this has been one of the points of dispute between Mir Yacoob and the Begum."

"What a noise the crows are making; it makes me think of the rookery at Winston," said Lorina.

She went out on the verandah, and looked across the garden. The birds were clamouring and quarrelling in the tamarind-trees. As she watched them a large black rook fluttered to the ground, and twenty of his fellows came down upon him with open beaks, pecking at him most unmercifully. Their action roused her curiosity, as well as her championship on behalf of the badly used bird, and she was eager to find out what was the matter.

The curiosity of some one else was also aroused, and she caught the gleam of white muslin amongst the oleanders. It was Dowluth. Lorina called to her, but she pretended at first not to hear. At a third

call she came out from behind the shrubs, and advanced towards the verandah.

"What has happened to the crows? They have been very noisy for the last half-an-hour."

"One of them is sick."

"Oh, and the horrid things are pecking it!"

"They always do that. When a bird is sick or hurt the rest turn against it and drive it away. If it cannot creep away and hide they go on pecking it till it is dead."

"What's the matter with that bird? Is its leg broken?"

There was a look of something like awe in the old woman's eyes as she let them rest with a strange fascination on the face of the English girl.

"It has eaten something——"

"Poisoned itself?"

"Perhaps."

Lorina took up her sun-hat, which was lying on the table in the verandah.

"I shall go and see if it is dead."

Dowluth followed her into the garden; she was more interested in the girl than the birds. The crow gave a last gasp and stretched itself out in death. As soon as its noisy assailants discovered that it was motionless they left it, and flew cawing and wheeling into the sky till they were lost in the distance.

"You must tell the gardener to bury this bird," said Lorina, as she turned to go back to the house.

It was a relief to have silence again in the garden Whilst the crows clamoured it was impossible to distinguish any other sound. Suddenly Lorina stopped and listened. She went back to the old woman, and, catching her by her arm, she said, sternly:

"What is that noise, Dowluth?"

A distant wail of grief invaded the peaceful garden,



and fell distinctly on her ear. There was no mistaking the sound after yesterday's experience. But there was a difference to-day. The voice was not that of a child nor of a single person. It was the cry of several, and it was made in chorus by women. Dowluth did not reply immediately. Lorina shook her by the arm.

"What is wrong this time? Tell me the truth. You have not dared to punish any of the household again!"

"Indeed, lady, I have done no evil. Allah knows that what I do, I do for the best. If it were not His will, He would not permit it. I have done nothing—nothing!"

"Then why do these women wail?"

"A syce's child died this morning at the stables; and now the Begum's coachman's son, a little lad of ten years, is ill. That crying means that he is dying or dead."

"What was their complaint?"

"The sickness."

Dowluth uttered the word with bated breath. As she spoke, the wail of the mourners came in long, sad cadences from beyond the garden wall, where the stables and the syce's dwellings were built.

"Have they had all they want in the way of food and medicine?"

"Yes; I went myself and carried some arrowroot. The medicine woman was there with medicines, and she did all she could. But it was of no use. The coachman's child was a fine boy and his only son. It is a pity, but it is the hand of Allah."

"Perhaps the children ate poison-berries, like the crow," suggested Lorina.

The old woman started.

"The crows might easily find poison-berries; they

fly everywhere. But how could the little ones find poison when they never go beyond the compound of the big house? It was the sickness, and Allah sent it. Allah grant that it may not take our little ones here."

There was a tenderness and affection in her tones which touched Lorina; yet she could not forget, altogether, the brutal cruelty of the preceding day.

"How is little Zara?" asked Lorina, reminded of the children.

Again Dowluth glanced at her with a peculiar shrinking awe-struck manner, as she replied, irritably:

"It is not good to speak of the child's health with the sickness flying about. It will only bring it upon her."

Lorina repressed the smile which rose to her lips; and again bidding the old woman call the gardener to see to the burial of the dead bird, she went back into the house.

"Do you hear the wailing?" she asked of Mrs Russel.

That good lady glanced at her apprehensively, as she replied:

"I hope that there is no repetition of yesterday's trouble."

Lorina reassured her, and explained the cause of the grief. "And Dowluth is in a fright about Zara catching the disease. I asked after the child, and she would not tell me how she was."

"It is considered unlucky to speak of the health of a single individual when there is illness about, especially if you mention the name. It is supposed to draw the dreaded evil down on the person. You should have asked after the children generally."

"That accounts for her anxiety, then."

"You say that a medicine woman has been attending



the children," Mrs Russel remarked thoughtfully. "I know what that means—a village quack. I think you ought to let the prince know. Ask him to have proper medical advice. If there is cholera the houses should be disinfected. It is a horribly infectious complaint; and Dowluth may well be nervous about the little ones in the harem."

"I hadn't thought of that," replied Lorina, sitting down at once to write.

In ten minutes she had despatched her letter; and an answer followed immediately that the matter should be attended to at once.

At four o'clock Lorina came down equipped for the ride. The afternoon tea was placed in the garden, and Mrs Russel sat at the table ready to dispense it.

"I am sorry that you get no drive," said Lorina, as she took up her cup, and helped herself to some hot buttered tea-cake.

"I am quite happy near the garden. Please don't trouble about me. I am so pleased to see that there is no further opposition made to your going out as you please."

"We have wrought a change for the better. Even the espionage is nearly at an end. Dowluth has been watching me with renewed activity to-day; but I really think that it is mere curiosity and want of manners. Please give me another cup of tea."

Mrs Russel refilled her cup, and as she handed it she said:

"I have received a kind invitation from Mrs Cunliffe, asking me to stay with her after you leave. I propose going back with her on Monday."

"And afterwards?"

"I should like to return to England."

"You don't fancy living in the harem, with me as the Begum?"

Mrs Russel laughed, as her eye ran over the figure of the English girl in front of her. She was so utterly unlike anything approaching the appearance of a Begum.

"I should not mind it if there were any necessity for my staying; but I see none. You are engaging an English maid, and will have the usual Anglo-Indian establishment of hired servants. I should only be in the way."

Lorina did not say her nay. Mir Yacoob would be all she needed as companion and friend. She required no chaperon.

"I believe your nerves are shaken by your past life in India, and you are afraid of the harem," said Lorina, as she put down her cup.

"Perhaps I am. My past experience has made me suspicious. When things go wrong I am uneasy; and when matters are smooth I am suspicious."

"Poor old dear!" said the girl, kissing her affectionately. "I wish you could feel as happy and contented as I am."

She buttoned her gloves, gathered up her riding-skirt, and departed, singing for very lightness of heart. Dowluth, at the corner of the house, hidden from sight by a group of foliage plants, watched her with a puzzled expression. The girl passed through the door of the harem with the firm step of healthy youth, and the old woman heard her song.

"The Shaitan himself puts out his hand to protect her. It is not Allah's will that an unbeliever should enter our house; for it is my house, though I am not of the blood. Was I not given to the Beebee on her marriage to be her favoured handmaid, and to pour water on the feet of the Shahzada her husband when she was absent? May Allah sanctify his soul and



pardon his sins! Ah! curse the day that ever his son let his eyes rest on the fair face of the English woman, that causer of evil! May Allah bring her annihilation! and thrice cursed be she for having bewitched him!"

The horse was at the entrance of the harem ready saddled, but Mir Yacoob was not there. She did not wait for him, but mounted and rode round to the front of his house. A dogcart was standing under the shade of a tree. As she pulled up beneath the portico, Mir Yacoob, in his riding-suit, rose from a seat in the verandah, and came towards her, followed by an Englishman.

"Let me introduce you to our medical officer, Major Fawcett," he said.

The major looked at her with a curiosity he found difficult to conceal. Like the collector and his wife, he had formed his own conclusions, and now had to remodel them. He unconsciously shared with Mr Cunliffe a vague antipathy to the union, and regretted that such a girl had not chosen a husband from amongst her own countrymen. Yet he had genuine admiration and respect for the prince as a man and a gentleman. After a little conversation, in which Major Fawcett mentioned that he had been called over by the prince to see some of his servants' children, Lorina said:

"I fear we have cholera at our doors. Is there anything to be done in the harem to safeguard us from infection?"

"Nothing; because the disease is not cholera.'

"Indeed!" she exclaimed, in surprise. "Then what is it?"

Major Fawcett grew serious, as he replied in a low tone:

"It is a case of poisoning. Two children are already

dead, and a third is very ill; but I am hoping that I shall be able to pull her round."

"How very strange! I wonder how the poor little things got hold of the poison. I suppose they must have eaten poisonous fruit or berries, like the crows."

"I don't trace the poison to berries; the symptoms point to arsenic. What do you mean by saying like the crows, Miss Carlyon?"

She told him of the little incident in the garden, and of the death of the bird.

"The bird and the children obtained the poison, probably, from the same source," was his comment.

"How could the children and the birds have got hold of arsenic? It is a difficult thing to procure."

"Not in India. You can get it at the bazaar almost as easily and as cheaply as you can buy sugar. I am afraid there has been some hankey-pankey among the servants. Someone is paying off a grudge against the stable. It is amongst themselves, and not directed against you, prince, which is a matter of congratulation."

Mir Yacoob did not reply. That he was troubled and anxious Lorina could see at a glance.

"You speak of it as if you were used to poison cases, Major Fawcett," said Lorina, to whom the news had been a shock.

"Poison is a favourite method of removing obnoxious people in this country."

"But aren't they afraid of being found out?"

"Apparently not. When poison is so easily procured it is very difficult to detect the culprit. The prince and I have been making the most searching inquiries; but I fear neither we, nor anyone else, will succeed in discovering anything, except the probable form in which the poison was administered."

"And what was that?"



"Rice-cakes called appas."

"I know them! I had some for early tea this morning. I gave a piece to Zara, but Dowluth took it from her, and threw it away I ate two of the cakes myself, and, you see, I am all right; there is nothing the matter with me."

"Did the appas come from my house?" asked Mir Yacoob, quickly.

"No; they were sent from the harem kitchen. I have had some very nice fancy bread from your mother's kitchen, too."

At this moment a messenger came to summon Major Fawcett to his patient. He made his adieux, and departed without delay. When he had gone Lorina said:

"You will prefer to stay here, Yacoob, and give up the ride?"

"I think I ought to do so; I can't very well leave Major Fawcett."

He approached close to Lorina's side, and looked at her entreatingly. His face was pale with an agony of fear he could not express.

"Lorina, my light! my life! you must leave the harem. I know not what all this means, but it makes me tremble for you. Ride now to Mrs Cunliffe, and tell her that you will come to her house to stay until I can take you safe into my own keeping. Leave Mrs Russel here to pack up for you. No one will hurt her; she is not my bride. Believe me, it will be for the best."

"Leave the harem now? and without a word? I could not do it."

He laid his hands on hers with a close, convulsive grasp.

"To-morrow; will you leave to-morrow?"



"This is rank cowardice, Yacoob. We are running away just as the battle is won."

"No, no!" he cried, passionately; "it is only a necessary precaution. Ask Mr Cunliffe. Tell him what has happened, and if he advises you to stay on, then do so. But I know he will not say that. He will want you to leave us as soon as possible."

The expression "leave us" roused Lorina's spirit into rebellion.

"I am very unwilling to go," she said.

"To please me!" he pleaded.

"Only to please you, Yacoob," she replied, gently, and conquered. "You are so good to me that I cannot refuse you. But I cannot go before mid-day to-morrow. Let me see; to-morrow is Friday, your Sunday. Can you let me have your brougham?"

"It is at your service, and I will see you at Mr Cunliffe's in the afternoon. When you come back this evening, eat nothing except what you receive personally from the hand of the woman who serves your table. She is the daughter of my old peon. I can trust her and her father not to hurt a hair of your head."

It seemed to relieve him of a great weight of trouble when she finally promised to shorten her visit in the harem. He had regained his self-possession, and he stood aside that she might start on her journey. She looked at him for a moment, and then laughed merrily.

"I cannot help being amused at your fears. The thought of that dignified mother of yours, the Begum, stooping to poison me, is so ludicrous! Why, if she had intended doing so at all, she would have done it days ago! Ah, Yacoob! you and Mrs Russel have both lost your nerve."

"I don't mind your laughing, dear lady, if you will only carry out my wishes," he replied.



"Very well; so be it, then."

She cantered down the avenue towards the gate. "It will only be for a few days, so it really doesn't matter; but I hate to show the enemy my back. It is not British. And, moreover, the whole thing is imaginary, a regular mare's nest," she said to herself, as she trotted more soberly along the level roads towards the cantonment.

CHAPTER X

THE JEWEL-CHAMBER AND ITS TREASURES

"No one knows when the rain will come or a life will go.
—*Tamil proverb.*

FRIDAY was a dull day for Lorina in the harem. It was the Mohammedan Sunday, and was religiously kept by the Begum and her household. How the ladies employed themselves all day Lorina could not tell. She saw nothing of them. They did not appear in the garden, and there was no sign of them in the house. Even Lalbee and her pretty children were nowhere visible on Friday mornings, nor were their voices audible in any part of the grounds.

On this particular Friday the day broke with a leaden sky, upon which huge masses of thunder-cloud reared their pale heads. The wind had dropped, only to gather fresh force for the coming storm. Lorina knew nothing of the weather signs of the tropics. She listened for the distant rumble which in England heralds the approach of the tempest, but no sound broke the stillness of the air, save the cawing of crows and chatter of mynas. Yet the storm might break at any moment, with a sudden flash of lightning, a squall of wind, and a torrent of rain. All over the country longing eyes turned skywards. Every living creature knew that the spell of drought was at an end, from the cultivator, who watched his withering crops, to the mosquito that bred in the channel close by. A flight of brown dragon-flies — typhoon-flies they are called



in the far East—hawked in the still air, darting and zig-zagging over the garden-beds as they preyed on the small insect life. Butterflies flew low, often stopping to rest, with closed wings, upon the strong-stemmed zinnias and marigolds. Black ants, red ants, little and big ants, hurried and scurried over their great highways, carrying their treasured eggs to safer quarters. The coming of the rain was writ large over the face of Nature for the benefit of those of her children who could read her fascinating language.

The woman who served the English ladies' meals brought the early breakfast into the garden this morning, after Lorina had taken her seat at the table. The dinner had been served in the same manner the evening before. The girl laughed at the precautions so openly adopted, but Mrs Russel approved. That lady also commended the arrangements made with Mrs Cunliffe; and she was already beginning, in dressing-gown and slippers, to fold and pack.

When the suggestion had been made to the collector that Miss Carlyon should stay the last few remaining days with them, it was received with hearty approval. But whilst she expressed her gratitude for their kind invitation, she could not help showing how averse she was to the adoption of such a course.

"It looks like, and it is, an expression of distrust towards the Begum. I should be deeply hurt if I received such treatment from a guest," she said.

"Your treatment of a guest is a very different affair from the Begum's," was Mr Cunliffe's reply.

"You don't mean to say that the Begum would poison me?" cried the girl, practical, and going straight to the point as usual.

"No; I won't make any such statement. I don't believe for a moment that the Begum would do such a

thing; but the harem holds many others besides the Begum. We know for a fact that, through some means or other, poison is flying about. In some incomprehensible manner it has reached those innocent children. Who can say where it may next be found, either accidentally or otherwise?"

"If any evil is at work it could not go long undiscovered," persisted Lorina.

"Knowing the harem as you do now, do you think it would be possible to make any real inquiry or search? The most superficial attempt at anything of the kind would raise a perfect storm of protest against the violation of the gosha of the house."

She was silenced. It was impossible to deny the mysterious power of that cherished principle of Mussulman domestic life. It would prevent any such inquiry being made. As Dowluth had said, the law in the harem was the Begum's word; there was no other law. She had experienced already the Begum's apathy and indifference to household misrule. Her calmer judgment told her that Mir Yacoob was right when he urged her removal, even though she was more than willing to stay and take every risk. Much against her inclination, it was arranged that she should go to the collector's house in time for lunch.

She was thinking of the departure now as she rose from the breakfast-table, and wandered aimlessly about the garden.

"I should have liked another game of play with those dear little children," she said to herself. "And then there is Lalbee. I sha'n't see her again unless she comes down to the drawing-room, a thing she has never done hitherto. I must have a few parting words with her."

She had been inexplicably drawn towards Lalbee by



warm feelings of friendship. Of all the family this forsaken young matron interested her the most. She was more companionable than Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm, who were children, and simple for their years; and she clung to the English girl with a genuine affection. She was not afraid of showing her affection, either. A scowl from Dowluth, or a frown from the Begum, had no power to overawe her. The prince's sisters trembled and shrank into their shells of reserve at the slightest sign of disapproval. But Lalbee had a courage of her own; and, though never guilty of open rebellion against the dictates of either the Begum or Dowluth, she had sufficient determination to give her some character. Lorina had regretted more than once that she was not one of the prince's sisters instead of being only a distant connection; for there was that about her which gave some hope of her becoming a possible convert to the social reforms which Lorina was so anxious to preach and exemplify in her own life.

Wandering through the garden, she came upon the tank. She stood at the edge and looked down. Two squirrels chased each other by the stairs, and disappeared into the dark passage. As she watched them a sudden thought struck her that this would be her last opportunity of exploring the jewel-chamber. She looked at her watch. There was still an hour before breakfast. This morning there would be no little people to tremble with fear for her safety and recall her. She went half-way down the stairs, and then remembered that it would be impossible to explore without a light, if she meant to do it thoroughly; and she was nothing if not thorough in everything she took in hand. She returned to the house and provided herself with one of the shade-candlesticks used for the dinner-table. It held the greater part of

a candle, which would more than serve her purpose, as she did not intend to be away for long. She put a box of matches in her pocket, and hurried back to the well. She saw no one except Dowluth, who, as usual, was keeping herself informed of Lorina's movements. But the girl was becoming used to the old woman's espionage; she scarcely noticed it now that her thoughts were occupied with something else. She had her liberty to come and go as she chose, and it mattered little who took account of her flittings so long as no opposition was offered.

She stood for a moment at the bottom of the stairs to look into the well. The level of the water was about a foot below that of the floor of the passage. Its cool, clear depths were still and glassy, reflecting the grey sky above. A frog croaked its pleasant anticipations of rain from a large circular drain high up in the wall, whence the surface-water from the garden and the house gushed in flooding torrents during the rains. She turned and entered the passage, struck a match, and lighted her candle. The illumination startled a lizard on the wall, and caused a bat to flutter blindly to the ground at her feet. There were no snakes. She proceeded fearlessly along the causeway. Her explorations as far as the steps up into the jewel-chamber were not new; yet she trod carefully and slowly, lifting the candle to look at the curious creatures that made their homes in that subterranean world of twilight. They crawled and scrambled away at her approach in blind haste, falling, like the bat, to the ground, and feebly sprawling at her feet. Beetles abounded; they ran along the dried moss on the floor, dazzled by the light, knocking themselves up against the walls of the passage in their hurry to escape. The place was very silent, but she could hear the piercing squeak of the



squirrels as they still played their game of hide-and-seek at the entrance. Close at hand the chirrup of a lizard sounded, as it wriggled up the wall out of her reach. She was intensely interested in all she saw, being always a lover of natural history. She picked her way carefully, so as not to crush any of the harmless, startled, scrambling insect life at her feet.

She stooped down to pass under the sluice door, and reached the steps which led into the chamber; and this was the limit of her previous explorations. She placed her foot on the bottom step; it was as sound and firm as the stone flooring. The water which usually covered everything had preserved the stone, and clothed it with waterweed and moss. This growth was dry and slippery under foot, like grass on a sunburnt field. After examining the stairs and peering into the room, she ventured to enter.

The chamber was about nine feet long by four broad. It was little more than a cupboard, such as is often to be found in old English houses. It was built entirely of rough, undressed stone similar to that used for the walls of the well. At one end there was a shaft of the size of a chimney. This shaft admitted air to the room; and on bright sunny days it allowed a faint beam of light to penetrate its depths.

Lorina paused on the threshold. Although in no way nervous or fanciful, she could not divest her mind of the idea of a hidden snake. It is common to all new-comers; they suspect a snake or a tiger at every turn; yet both are distinctly uncommon sights. Even if snakes were common objects in Vellore, there was no need to fear their presence in that subterranean place, if she had only known it. Snakes are good weather prophets. Though not averse to taking to

the water when it suits their purpose, there is nothing they dislike more than the rollicking, irresponsible torrent of a sudden downpour; and at such times they are not likely to be caught napping in the water-courses. An unerring instinct leads them to seek dry shelter under a boulder on high ground, or among flowerpots in covered verandahs.

She held up her skirts in one hand, and with the other lifted the candle above the level of her eyes as she looked round. Her first impression was one of disappointment. The room was empty, except for a block of stone or wood which was lying on the floor against the wall. In one corner was a broken earthen vessel which, like, everything else, was covered with waterweed and moss.

She was attracted first to the broken pot. She turned the pieces over gingerly with her foot; there was nothing to be seen but the alluvial deposit from the water and the dried waterweed. She next examined the block, giving it a vigorous kick with her foot. She was startled to hear a hollow noise, which proclaimed that the material was not stone. It was the sound which might be expected from a chest if it were struck. She stooped to examine it more closely, and was delighted to find that it was a chest. But it was so caked and covered with deposit that its identity was quite hidden at first sight. Placing the candle on the ground, she set to work to open the lid. The box stood with its hasp next to the wall and its hinges outwards. There was no lock upon it; it had once been fastened with a padlock, but the padlock was gone. After a good pull or two from her strong, young arm, the lid yielded, and she forced its rusty hinges to move.

But alas! all her hopes were shattered; glittering



diamonds, gleaming emeralds, fiery rubies there were none. The chest was perfectly empty. She laughed as she said to herself:

"What an idiot I am for thinking it could have been otherwise! Who would leave an unlocked box in an open chamber if it contained any valuables? Of course it is empty, and I should have been surprised to have found even a single copper coin or brass cup in it."

She let the lid fall down with a bang upon the chest, and rose from her knees to examine the rest of the room. The shaft was the next thing to attract her. She craned back her head and looked upwards. There was a fluttering above her head, as bird or bat escaped through one of the ventilating holes in the stone-work. She listened for the twitter or the treble squeak, to tell her which of the two she had disturbed, but could hear neither. Instead of the voice of a creature she heard the deep tones of heaven's artillery, the unmistakable roll of thunder. It sounded far away. Though she knew that it heralded rain, yet, according to her English experience, there was no need to hurry back to the house. The storm would brew, probably for an hour before it came up, and finally burst overhead.

So, without haste, she went back to the chest for her candle to continue the exploration. Lifting the light high above her head, she examined the walls of the room, and noticed for the first time that there was a recess in the wall above the box. It was between six and seven feet from the ground, and formed a kind of shelf just high enough to escape high-water level in times of flood. This would be the place for storing any jewel-caskets which might be kept in the room. She fancied that she caught sight of a bowl,

and the vague outline of some other objects extending along the shelf; but it was impossible from her position to make them out distinctly. The bowl might possibly contain jewels, or it might itself consist of one of the precious metals discoloured by age. The shelf was too high for her to reach. She required to be raised a couple of feet before she could touch the bowl. She looked around for some means of mounting the necessary two feet.

Ah! how stupid, to be sure! There lay the very thing before her, and placed exactly where she wanted it—the chest, of course. But would it bear her weight? Long exposure to water decays the hardest wood. She tested its strength carefully. It would never do to sprain an ankle and be disabled in that subterranean hiding-place; for no one knew whither she had gone. Mrs Russel would hardly think of searching for her there; and not another soul in the harem, not even the watching, prowling Dowluth, would venture down into those jin-haunted regions. Another roll of thunder sounded in a long, muffled peal down the ventilator.

She was satisfied that the chest would bear her weight, and she mounted it. It brought her within reach of what she wanted. Holding the candle in her left hand, to throw light upon the shelf, she laid her right hand upon the coveted object. As she did so, she glanced curiously at the nondescript articles which were lying along the shelf. They looked like sticks—driftwood, she thought—thrown up there on some great flood-tide, together with other debris washed from the garden.

The bowl safe in her hand, she jumped to the ground, and, raising her prize to the light, examined it with eager curiosity. She uttered a sharp, involuntary cry of horror, started back, and dropped it to the ground.



It was a skull—a human skull, with the lower jaw fallen away. The upper teeth still remained in their sockets, and the whole was brown with age and damp. The skull rolled to the chest and lay upon its jaw, disclosing the sightless cavities of the eyes. Lorina gazed, spell-bound and horror-struck. The story of the slave-girl occurred to her mind; how she tried to escape from punishment at Dowluth's hands, by running down the steps of the well, and plunging into its depths; how the water had carried her into the passage, where the jin had caught her; and how she had been heard for days crying for deliverance from her dreaded jailers. The incidents of the tale crowded vividly into Lorina's brain as she stood there, her eyes fixed on the evidence of its truth. She knew what Dowluth's punishments meant, and she could understand how it was that the poor girl preferred a merciful death by drowning to the cruelties of the torture chamber. Lorina shuddered, and again the thunder rumbled down the shaft.

Then a sudden horror seized her. She was alone with death. The debris on the shelf above was nothing more nor less than the skeleton to which the skull belonged. She was in a tomb, a chamber of incarceration and slow death. The water must have carried the girl into the room. She had struggled from a watery grave with a natural instinct of self-preservation—an instinct which is possessed by every living creature, and which would often save the suicide if means were at hand for escape—only to meet the more terrible fate of starvation. What must have been the poor victim's feelings as, imprisoned there, she vainly entreated those above to come to her rescue? Her cries were taken for those of supernatural beings by the stupid, ignorant inhabitants of the harem. The hideousness of it all was appalling.

Yet, though filled with horror, she had no fear. She neither trembled nor looked round fearfully for ghost or spirit. Her whole soul was roused to pity for the unfortunate victim; and she burned with a righteous indignation against the tyranny which drove a poor defenceless creature to such a death.

She turned from the room, and went sorrowfully down the steps. She had no desire to explore farther, if exploration meant the disclosure of such secrets of the harem as this. Besides, she had heard the warning voice of the thunder again, and it would be well to reach the shelter of the house before the storm broke. She followed the passage by the light of the candle, keeping her eyes upon the floor to pick her way. When she had gone a little distance, she raised them to look for the spot of daylight that marked the entrance of the passage.

She could scarcely believe her eyes, and stopped short in astonishment. The spot had disappeared, and there was nothing but a blank darkness beyond the light of the candle. Where was she? Had she taken a wrong turning? She peered into the blackness, seeking for the familiar ray of daylight.

No; it was not there. Surely she had made no mistake; it was the same passage; there was no change in the floor and the walls, and she was going in the right direction. Perhaps the storm-clouds had gathered so thickly as to darken the entrance. Yet that could hardly be; no cloud could obscure the daylight sufficiently to cause such a blackness at the entrance.

She started forward with eager curiosity, and the mystery was solved. She almost ran into the blank opposing wall of the sluice-door before she realised that it was confronting her. The story of the slave-girl, the sight of her mouldering skeleton in the jewel-



chamber, sank into oblivion before the stupendous calamity which had befallen her.

The gardener, seeing that rain was now certainly coming, must have lowered the door to prevent the flooding of the chamber, not knowing that she was searching its hidden recesses.

She examined the huge iron sluice deliberately. Though startled, she was still self-possessed. There was no sudden faintness of heart, nor upsetting of mental balance at the realisation of the grave catastrophe. She found that the door was not lowered to the bottom. There was a space of eight inches left, through which she could push a hand or a foot, but nothing more. She stood for a few minutes considering the situation. If the rain came, this space would allow the water to flow underneath the door. The passage would be flooded, and if there was a heavy and continuous downpour it was possible that she might be driven to take refuge in the jewel-chamber.

Was there any chance of escape by the jewel-chamber? She scarcely dared to hope it, with the recollection of the victim already claimed by that prison. To make sure, however, she returned there at once, and examined the ventilating shaft. It was a narrow opening, up which a monkey might climb, but it was too small to admit a human being.

She raised her voice, and called. She called Mir Yacoob and Mrs Russel. She shouted Dowluth's name, in the faint hope that the sound might meet the old woman's ears. Even as she did so she told herself that it was but waste of breath. The only person likely to hear was the gardener; and his superstition would prevent him from doing anything, except to put a respectful distance between himself

and the devil-haunted place. Her eyes fell on the skull with its large round empty eye-holes. It was a warning in itself not to stay longer in that death-trap. There was still the unexplored passage beyond.

Without losing valuable time, or wasting breath by shouting up the shaft, Lorina again descended the steps and turned her back on the jewel chamber. Fortunately, she had brought a long piece of candle with her, and it still burned brightly. Picking her way carefully, her courage still supporting her, she travelled along the passage, examining every inch of wall and floor for sign of exit. At a distance corresponding with that on the other side she came to another sluice-door. "Thank Heaven!" she ejaculated, as she realised that it was open.

She stopped and looked up as a slight sound above caught her ear. Something creaked and grated in the roof. She held her candle as high as she could reach; its light revealed the door in motion. The heavy iron shutter was slowly descending in its grooves, and in another twenty seconds it would bar the way and shut her in. An instinct of self-preservation made her act on the spur of the moment. With a gasp she darted forward, stooping her head to avoid contact with the door, which was steadily reducing the space between itself and the floor. How she got through she did not know; for, low as she bent her head, the coils of her hair caught the edge of the iron and were disarranged; the candle dropped from her hands and was extinguished. Gasping, panting, with her heart throbbing like a sledge-hammer, she stood leaning against the wall, trembling for the first time.

She was now in utter darkness, which added to the horror of the moment. Most women would have screamed or fainted, or perhaps have rushed headlong



into a new danger. But, though her natural courage had received a nasty jar, she did not lose her head. She only wanted time to recover, and she would then be prepared to make another endeavour to extricate herself from her dilemma.

The first thing to be done was to recover her candle if possible. The matches were still in her pocket. She lighted one, and, to her joy, discovered the candle lying almost at her feet. It had fallen out of the candlestick and rolled forward, whilst the latter had remained on the farther side of the door. She lighted the candle and experienced that sensation of relief and companionship which a light confers after utter darkness. An examination of the door showed that it had been arrested in its descent like the other, and a space of seven or eight inches was left beneath it. As she gazed at its large riveted plates of iron she realised that she had only been saved from certain death by the merest chance. And what a death it would have been! Imprisoned between those terrible sluices, either to drown in the in-rush of water when the floods came, or to starve slowly in the presence of that dreadful skeleton. The experience of the slave-girl would be repeated in herself step by step. She would battle first with the waters, and then, as they overwhelmed her, she would creep on to that very same shelf, leaving her bones to moulder side by side with those of the girl.

Then her excited brain caught at a second possibility; there was yet another danger she had escaped only by a miracle. The door was moving when she passed beneath it. What would have happened if the restraining hand of the unconscious gardener above had let go the handle of the crank, and allowed the sluice to come crashing down with all its weight?

She would have been caught and crushed, caught by a limb or caught by the body, just as a centipede had been trapped in its sluggish escape from the narrow groove. It was still writhing with half of its body which was free; and its numerous legs were vainly pawing the air in its futile endeavours to escape from the relentless iron that crushed it.

She remained for some time resting against the wall, feeling sick with the shock of it all; she wanted time to collect her scattered senses before she could continue her explorations. There might be other dangers to face before the light and air of the upper earth could be reached. She remembered hearing that the passage led into Mir Yacoob's house; escape must therefore be sought in that direction.

She looked at her candle which she now carried in her fingers. The hot wax dripped down and scalded her. Taking her handkerchief from her pocket, she improvised a candlestick. It was necessary to proceed at once with her search so as to utilise the precious light. It revealed walls of stone with an arched roof, exactly similar to the causeway at the other end. She tried to pierce the darkness of the narrow passage. There was no daylight to be seen—not a single ray. As this fact forced itself upon her attention, her heart gave a throb. Was it possible that by penetrating farther she was merely courting a double imprisonment? Who could tell how many more sluice-doors there might be? With this thought in her mind she again started forward. Her self-possession and courage had been shaken, yet neither was upset; she still trod warily, keeping a watchful eye upon her path.

Suddenly, out of the darkness in front the glimmer of the candle showed a barrier across the passage. It appeared to end abruptly in a forbidding wall of stone.



Again her heart gave one of those warning throbs, which seem to make it leap into the throat. On closer inspection, however, she found, to her great relief, that instead of being the end, it was only an angle, where the passage turned sharply to the right.

No sooner had she rounded the corner than she detected a faint greyness in the distance which gave promise of daylight. Shading the candle with her hand she strained her eyes upon the point. Yes; there could be no doubt of it; it was the blessed light of day coming from the upper earth, and giving promise of release from a living tomb. It was similar to the appearance of the light at the other opening, with which she had made herself so familiar in her games with the children; but it was fainter. This might be due to the tank being smaller, or to the fact that the sky was overcast.

With gratitude in her heart for her deliverance she moved on towards the light, through a long, straight passage, smaller and narrower than the other. It ended so abruptly that, had she not been treading with a care that never forsook her, she would have fallen headlong into a large well. It was twenty feet square. and resembled that in the grounds of the harem. But there was a single exception, and it was of no small importance. No stairs connected the passage with the top of the well. There were signs that steps had originally existed; but they had been broken away and demolished. Probably this had been done purposely, in order to prevent access to the secret chamber and the grounds of the harem.

In old days a passage such as this, communicating with the harem, was a very necessary addition to a native gentleman's house. It provided a treasure chamber, as has already been related, and it also served

as a refuge for the master of the house in case of an attack by an overwhelming number of marauders. Such attacks were not infrequent in the old lawless days of misrule under the native princes. Fire and sword burned and destroyed ruthlessly, cruelly. Under such circumstances, it was possible to reach the harem and escape over the wall, where a faithful servant, with horses ready saddled, could enable the fugitive to get away from his enemies. His women might take care of themselves. They could easily be replaced; more easily than the treasure. But his own life, once taken, could not be restored; therefore, in his eyes, it was necessary before all things to save it. If the water were high he might still wade down the passage, guided by a faithful water-carrier. Since the establishment of the British Raj the passage was no longer needed as a means of escape; but there was every likelihood of its being used for other purposes. A prince's establishment included many young men whose time hung heavily on their hands from want of employment, and in whose veins the wild blood of the old adventurers still flowed. The harem contained handsome slave-girls, to whom every secluded nook in the jungly harem garden was known. It was necessary to break down the stairs; and though a man might still jump into the well and follow the subterranean way, there would be no means of return. The stone bracket which formed the top step, and which was all that remained of the stairs, was out of reach.

Lorina examined the walls of the well with a searching scrutiny. Apparently the well was unused, for there was no rope to indicate that the water-carrier ever visited it. Her heart sank as she ran her eyes over the bare walls again and again. There was not the smallest sign of any means of escape. She stood in the archway



of the passage, and craned her neck forward. By so doing she obtained a view of the three sides. The fourth, which was pierced by a causeway, was immediately over her head and not so easy to be seen. The well appeared to be covered in, and the upper part, which was above ground and in the form of a detached outhouse, had open honeycomb work near the sloping roof. This honeycombing consisted of curved tiles placed one over the other. They allowed sufficient daylight to penetrate to render the candle no longer necessary. Lorina had matches in her pocket, so she extinguished it, and placed it on the ground at her feet.

Now that she was once more in touch with the surface she could hear the thunder. It sounded louder than when she was in the chamber, and its deep bass echoed round the sides of the wall. She could also hear the roar of the rain, which had begun to fall with tropical violence. A stream of muddy water poured from a pipe high up in the wall, clattering noisily as it touched the black depths below. Every minute it increased in volume, showing that the rain had only just begun. In ten minutes the noisy splash of falling water drowned all other sounds of the storm that raged above, except an occasional burst of thunder.

As soon as Lorina had assured herself that progress was stopped, and that she could get no farther unaided, she set herself to shout for help. Those who have never tried it can have no notion of the difficulty a soft-voiced, refined woman finds in making a noise which is worthy of the name of shouting. She can call and cry; but, unless startled or struck by a sudden agony of pain, she cannot even scream with any effect. Lorina experienced that difficulty now. She called, but her cry was drowned by the water-

spout. She forced her lungs and scraped her throat in an attempt to yell, as boys yell at home in the fields to scare the crows. But after five or ten minutes she became so hoarse that she could scarcely utter a sound. Having had no breakfast, except the light morning meal under the trees, the shouting proved very exhausting, and she relapsed into silence and thought. How soon would her absence be discovered? Not till breakfast-time, and then Mrs Russel would not know where to look. The harem would be searched first, then the garden. Mrs Russel, being unsuccessful, would send across to Mir Yacoob. Dowluth was the only one who had seen her go out into the garden. It was more than probable that the spying, watchful old woman was also aware that she had gone down the steps of the well. If so, she would be able to give the prince a clue to her whereabouts, and a close search would be made. The sluice-doors would be raised, and help might come from either side. With the thought of Dowluth there flashed across her brain an awful suspicion, followed by swift conviction. Dowluth to the rescue? Impossible to hope for salvation from that quarter! Was it not Dowluth's hand, and none other, that had compassed her incarceration? Assistance from the harem was hopeless. It was to Mir Yacoob that she must look for help.

But it was Friday, she suddenly remembered in dismay. On Friday it was his custom to drive out some distance to a large mosque, where he attended a service of prayer, and listened to two sermons delivered by a Moola for whom he had a great regard. He would not be back till mid-day, perhaps not so soon if he stayed until the storm was spent. Her heart sank a little as she calculated her chance



of a speedy deliverance. Still, she could wait, even if it meant a whole day. Meanwhile she shouted at intervals, as there was just a possibility that her voice might be heard by someone in Mir Yacoob's house.

At the end of half-an-hour she grew weary of standing; she sat down on the floor, leaning her back against the wall. But she was not altogether comfortable, although it rested her to a certain extent. There were too many strange creatures crawling and scrambling about, in a blind hurry to escape from a danger which their instinct told them was threatening. There were beetles and spiders, centipedes and large ants, besides others which she could not class. She was enough of a naturalist to know that none of these insects were aggressive or poisonous; or, even if they were, their activity was the result of fear, and she need have no apprehension.

Having thoroughly grasped the situation, and contemplated the pros and cons with a coolness not ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have shown, she resigned herself to her fate, and actually found an occupation in watching the beetles and the spiders in their eccentric peregrinations. They were all of that curious grey colour common to the denizens of subterraneous regions, but not often seen above ground; and they were perplexed by the light. The water still poured from the spout, but its volume, though sufficient to make a great noise, was not enough to raise the level of the tank in any appreciable manner. It would require many hours before it could touch the floor of the passage.

The greatest inconvenience of the moment was her hunger, which she had time to think of now that the excitement had subsided. Pleasant visions of hot



coffee, white bread and butter, corned beef, buttered eggs, and other breakfast delicacies, with which Mir Yacoob kept her table liberally supplied, tantalised her with their vividness. She also felt cold. The air had become damp with rain, and there was an earthy smell with the inrush of surface water which was not pleasant. She was seated in an uncomfortable position, and her back ached, even though she had the wall to lean against. Her eyes were frequently lifted to the stone bracket above, and her ear as often bent towards the passage. But neither sight nor sound revealed anything otherwise than what she had already seen or heard.

Two long hours passed. The hurrying insects seemed in greater haste than ever, and no longer in doubt as to which road they would pursue. They all swarmed from the passage, running close by the wall where she had left a space for them to pass unimpeded by her feet. They raced along with headlong impetuosity, and the majority of them fell into the tank, where they lay feebly sprawling and drowning, at the mercy of the eddies and wavelets caused by the flow from the spout. A larger crowd than heretofore came tumbling along, jostling each other in their eagerness; and amongst them was a small snake, whilst close behind crept a dark, devouring line, black and shining. Lorina sprang to her feet, lifting her skirts, and standing on guard against the new danger. But the snake passed on, and slid into the water. The line that followed was nothing living; it was only a stream of water which was making its way to join the brawling water of the tank. She wondered where it came from. Then she remembered that the sluice-doors had not been shut down entirely. The harem tank was supplied from the drainage of a much larger area than the one



from which this was being filled, and its surplus waters were beginning to flow into this tank.

A shudder, partly from cold and partly from consternation, shook her as she faced this new discomfort. The water flowed round her feet, increasing in volume, and carrying with it an avalanche of debris, living and dead. It rose above the soles of her feet, covering her shoes; higher still it came, till it washed about her ankles. As the stream increased in strength she felt strange objects strike her legs. Once she thought the coils of a snake were about her feet. She stooped and snatched at the trailing object; it was nothing more formidable than the decayed fibrous strand of a palm-leaf.

The stream poured over the edge of the passage floor into the tank, and Lorina was not blind to the fact that there would soon be a perceptible rise in the level of the water. She had learnt from Lalbee's chatter that, as a rule, the passage was partially submerged, though rarely hidden altogether from view. If this were so, there was the unpleasant prospect of the flood gradually rising breast-high, perhaps higher,

Standing at the opening, a hand resting against the wall to support her, she waited and watched as the long hours rolled by. The water of the well rose to the level of the floor. The fall from the passage no longer sounded in her ear, although she still heard the spouting jet from above. Slowly and surely the flood came higher. It reached her knees, and crept towards her waist, cold and deathlike in its embrace. The thunder died away; it had done its work in bursting open the leaden skies; but the rain still poured down in torrents.

Sick at heart, yet with a magnificent courage which was indomitable, Lorina faced the situation with its

accumulated horrors. In another hour the water would be waist-deep; in two it would reach her chest; in three her neck. She could swim, but what would swimming avail in a well from which there were no means of escape. It meant a long, exhaustive struggle, with inevitable drowning at the end. If she were to retain her footing in the passage against the stream of water, death was equally certain when exhaustion overwhelmed her.

Again and again she called aloud, with dogged energy; but the only reply was from the water-pipe.

After some time she ceased to watch for deliverance. Hope slowly died away. She could not dismiss the terrible thought that was forcing itself upon her: no one knew whither she had betaken herself that morning, except Dowluth. Dowluth! Would not the old woman keep silence—an evil, purposeful silence? A tremor seized her now and then as she felt the water creeping onwards, but she neither fainted nor shed useless tears, nor did she lose her presence of mind. On the contrary, she cast about for means of husbanding her strength, and changed her position, leaning back against the wall, with her feet firmly planted for support. It was necessary, as the water rose, to keep her hands up; to rest them, she crossed them on her breast.

As she had faced the unknown regions of the East, so she now faced the unknown Valley of the Shadow of Death, to die as she had lived—fearless, innocent, and single-hearted. She lifted her soul in a simple, confiding, childlike prayer of resignation, and closed her eyes in patience, awaiting the fulfilment of a divine Father's will. She was ready for the supreme moment when she should be summoned into the presence of her Maker.



CHAPTER XI

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

"Is the world changed because it reads books, and washes? Lo, the customs of the fathers bind the children."—F. A. STEEL.

MRS RUSSEL was very busy over her labour of love, folding the pretty frocks, arranging the gloves and ribbons, and stowing away the beautiful lace-trimmed garments with which Lorina clothed herself. She took a melancholy pleasure in her self-imposed task. It was almost the last service of love which she could render the girl, after which she would pass out of her life, and, perhaps, see her no more. She was unfeignedly glad that Lorina was leaving the harem at once, and she intended to hurry the girl off, if possible, before the time fixed for her departure to the collector's.

When she had finished as much as was possible of the packing, she retired to her room to make preparation for breakfast. She was a little late in getting downstairs, and was ready with an apology as she entered the room.

To her surprise, Lorina was not there. She waited a few minutes, expecting to hear her footstep on the stairs every moment. It was impossible that she could still be out in the garden. It had been thundering for the past hour, and already the rain was beginning to fall. Mrs Russel inquired of the waiting-woman whether she had seen Miss Carlyon, and received a reply in the negative. She sat down to her breakfast, but

ate it with a troubled mind. Yet she told herself more than once that she need not be alarmed. Lorina had been late before; she had probably been walking in the outer compound beyond the harem, and been caught by the storm. She would have sought shelter either in Mir Yacoob's house or in the guard-room at the big gate leading into the road. Thus comforting herself, she finished her breakfast.

"Shall I take the breakfast away?" asked the serving-woman.

"No. Miss Carlyon will be in presently. Keep the coffee and the buttered eggs hot, and I will call you when she comes in. See that no one touches the food."

The woman looked at her, and nodded. She understood what Mrs Russel meant by touching.

"How are the children at the stables this morning?" that lady asked.

"The third is dead, but none of the others are ill. There will be no more sickness in the stable," the woman replied, significantly.

"And we want no sickness here," added Mrs Russel, more to herself than to the serving-maid.

She took out her work, for it was impossible to fix her attention upon a book. The rain poured down in torrents. The lightning rent the sky with its sinuous streams of electricity, and the thunder roared. Ten o'clock struck, and Lorina did not come. Mrs Russel was thoroughly uneasy. It was impossible to give her attention to the needlework. She had intended, if the storm cleared, to get Lorina off to the collector's by twelve o'clock. Even if the rain still continued, she meant to make an effort to hasten the girl's departure. She would be safe in the brougham, and the luggage could follow at any time. If she delayed her return much longer, it would be impossible to reach Mr



Cunliffe's house in time for tiffin; and that would necessitate another meal in the harem, which she was anxious Lorina should avoid.

She rang a hand-bell which was usually answered by Cassim. He appeared at the summons, looking cold and unwholesome, like a large toad. He loved the sunshine, and hated wet weather. He had wrapped himself in a blanket, and had been chewing a piece of opium to keep away the fever. Under its influence he was stupid and half-asleep.

"Where is the young lady?" asked Mrs Russel.

"Upstairs, sahiba, at her bath," he replied, mechanically.

"No she isn't," replied Mrs Russel, with some irritation.

"I haven't seen her, lady."

"She went out this morning as usual in the garden, and she hasn't returned."

Cassim had nothing to say; he could only stare at the speaker, and wait for orders.

"Go and ask if any of the women of the harem have seen her this morning."

He waddled off in the direction of Dowluth's apartment, and was absent fifteen or twenty minutes. During that time Mrs Russel chafed and fumed in increasing anxiety for the girl's welfare. He returned with the assurance that Miss Carlyon had not been seen at all that morning. She had not been walking in the garden.

"But our waiting-woman says that she served her with early tea in the garden. Miss Carlyon was there as usual at seven o'clock; and after she had finished tea, the woman saw her walking amongst the flower-beds."

Mrs Russel was angry at his unnecessary lies. She went to the woman who still waited with the breakfast

in one of the ante-rooms, and again questioned her. The same story was repeated; and the woman added that Dowluth could confirm what she said; for she too saw Miss Carlyon walking in the garden. Cassim listened in stolid silence.

"You hear what she says. Now go and call Dowluth, and tell her to come at once. I wish to speak with her."

Mrs Russel's tones were sharp, and they penetrated the dull brain. He dared not disobey, and again departed in haste. He was absent another quarter of an hour. Perhaps it was Dowluth's unwillingness to come that kept him this time. Mrs Russel paced the room in agitation until the two crafty Orientals appeared. Dowluth looked cross and sulky. She would have liked to have refused to answer the catechising which she knew was coming, but after what had happened with the prince she dared not disobey the English lady.

"I want you to tell me where you last saw Miss Carlyon," said Mrs Russel, in the woman's own language.

She spoke temperately, making a great effort to control herself. She did not wish it to appear that she feared anything but inconvenience by the non-appearance of her charge.

"I saw her in the garden; she walked amongst the flowers."

She answered unwillingly, but Mrs Russel took no notice of her manner; she continued to ply her with questions.

"And after walking in the garden, where did she go?"

"She went towards the gate. The woman let her out into the sahib's compound, at her own request."



"You are sure that she went out of the grounds of the harem?"

"Quite sure."

"Cassim, call the woman of the gate."

He was about to do her bidding, when Dowluth seized him by the arm.

"Stay where you are, sleepy-head; I will call her myself."

She was absent a few minutes, and returned with the woman who kept the key.

"You opened the door for Miss Carlyon this morning, I am told. Did she go out?"

The woman hesitated, and looked at Dowluth, who said, impatiently:

"Speak! tell the lady you saw her go."

The guardian of the gate repeated the words after Dowluth.

"Has she returned?"

"No, sahiba."

Mrs Russel put a few more questions, but could elicit nothing, except that it was about eight o'clock in the morning when she opened the gate.

"Cassim, go at once to the prince's house, and ask if Miss Carlyon is there. You can go, Dowluth; and you," she said, to the guard.

Providing himself with a large palm-leaf umbrella, Cassim paddled across to the back premises of Mir Yacoob's house. The servants were assembled in the verandah that faced the kitchens, and were warming themselves over a big pan of charcoal, as the air had grown chilly with the rain. They rose up at his approach, and made room for him in their circle. He squatted down, and prosecuted his enquiries with easy deliberation. First he told the story of Miss Carlyon's disappearance, and dwelt at length on the trouble Mrs

Russel had given him. Then he put the questions he was charged to make. The reply was the same. No one had seen the young English lady. Was she indeed missing? Then what would the Shahzada say? It boded ill for their comfort if anything happened to her, for she was the light of his eyes. Was it not still in the memory of the oldest of them how the Shahzada, his father, had raged and stormed when his favourite slave disappeared, the one whom Dowluth hated? Ay! the handsome girl who had laughed at the Beebee and her hand-maid with all the pride of the first favourite of the harem. True, the young sahib was gentler than the Shahzada, Allah preserve his soul! yet he was his son, and his madness might break forth, bringing pain and perhaps death to those around him.

The old Mussulman peon was the most perturbed; his memory reached farther back than the others. Moreover, his father and his grandfather before him had served the family; and he, like his ancestors, made his master's cause his own. He subjected the harem servant to a severe cross-questioning. But he knew nothing, and had he known or suspected anything, the opium he had taken made him too stupid to give them any clue or hint.

Cassim returned to the harem, and told all that there was to tell. Miss Carlyon had not been seen that morning. The master was out; he had been absent since the morning, and might return at any minute. His breakfast still awaited him.

"He is delayed by the rain," said Dowluth, who waited to hear what news Cassim brought.

"You must send to the guard-house at the big gate and ask if she is there," said Mrs Russel.

But the quest met with no better success. The



English lady had not been near the guard-house that morning; no one but the market-people with the daily supplies for the two houses had passed the gates except the master.

"Is there any other place where Miss Carlyon could shelter except at the guard-house?" asked Mrs Russel.

Dowluth replied that there was none. She had recovered from her sulky fit, and, to Mrs Russel's surprise, she seemed to be taking an interest in the search. Mrs Russel went up to her room, and put on her waterproof and thick boots. Armed with a stout umbrella, she went out into the garden, and searched its every nook and corner; in spite of the rain, which was still descending steadily. She even ventured down the steps of the well, thinking it just possible that Lorina might have sought shelter in the passage. She had heard of the games with the children. The water had already risen to the floor of the passage and flooded it. It was extremely unlikely that anyone in their senses should prefer to stay there, when it would be so easy to run across from the tank to the house, even if the rain were descending. It was only a forlorn hope that made her search the well. She called down the passage, and was scarcely surprised to receive no reply.

Her fears were now thoroughly aroused, although at present she could give them no form. She peered into the depths of the well, wondering if she could have fallen in. The water was thick and muddy from the streams which had flowed and were still flowing into it on all sides.

From the garden she went to the kitchens and outhouses. Startled women met her at every turn. They stood aside to let her enter, dripping, eager, and trembling with a formless dread. On her departure they



whispered together, and the burden of their talk was the same as that of the house over the wall. What would the Shahzada say? How would he bear the misfortune which had fallen on them.

Mrs Russel returned to the house. Dowluth still waited to hear whether she had been successful.

"You must go to the Begum, and tell her. I should like to have the house searched."

The old woman went at once to do her bidding, and returned in a few minutes.

"The Beebee is much concerned. The lady is not with her. She asks you to seek for her where you will; the house is open to you. If madam will come now, we will begin the search at once."

Mrs Russel, mindful of rheumatism and her elderly bones, got rid of her wet outer garments before she accompanied Dowluth on her peregrination through the house. What a rabbit-warren of a place it was. Room after room, close, ill-smelling, unaired, empty, except for cushions, mats, and a few earthen water-vessels, was searched. Slaves of all ages were encountered, shrinking and fearful at they knew not what, except that things were not going well with the great ones of the house, and that meant trouble, of course, for the subordinates. The children in their nursery were seen and questioned. Shahjee and Noor-i-Chasm were interviewed and told the sad tale, which left them tearful and nervous.

Mrs Russel was thoroughly tired out with travelling up and down stairs and traversing passages.

"There is only one person I have not seen to ask. That is Lalbee. Where is she?"

Dowluth started.

Her room was empty. Was she not with the sahib's sisters?"



"I don't remember noticing her there. Go back, and ask if they know where she is. I must see her; but I am so tired that I cannot walk up those stairs again."

Mrs Russel went to the sitting-room, and threw herself into an easy-chair. The waiting-woman came to ask if she might take the breakfast back to the sahib's kitchen. She gave consent, and directed her to keep a watch for the prince's return. As soon as he came home she wished to go over to him, rain or no rain, and confer with him as to the best measures to be taken to find Lorina.

She was quite aware of the girl's independence; and she still clung to the hope that she would turn up presently, when the rain had ceased, with a tale of adventure and refuge from the storm. She was a girl of resource and courage, quite as capable as any Englishwoman of taking care of herself.

The waiting-woman had scarcely disappeared with her tray, when Dowluth, with wide eyes and yellowing skin, burst in upon Mrs Russel with the news that Lalbee was nowhere to be found.

The old woman had preserved her equanimity throughout the search for Lorina, but now her presence of mind was gone. She was distracted with grief and consternation, and beside herself with angry fear.

"The English lady has spirited her away. Not content with bewitching the sahib, she has laid her spells upon this innocent girl. Aiyo! that ever the young sahib should live to bring such evil on the house!"

Then Mrs Russel rose up from her chair, her fatigue forgotten, with wrath in her tones.

"Be silent, woman! More likely it is Lalbee who has led away the English lady. But nothing can be

Unknowingly, Mrs Russel thought. What if Lalbee h into the passage?

In a perfect frenzy of fear, to question him; but he wa the harem door to ask who h ing. She was assured again the market-women had gon carried baskets on their heads, in their dark cumblies (blanke the rain. Although she put t Dowluth did not expect to he through the gate. To do so gosha, and bring eternal disg the family. No; she had passage after that cursed infid

Alone in her room, and nc to her fears lest she should in sat in an agony of grief, for a love almost as great as th upon the Begum. She ransac every slave-girl on the premis self went to the outhouses a corner was left unsearched. looking, she too ran down al



"That woman witch! that cursed infidel! It is her doing; and by this time the water has covered them both."

And Dowluth wailed aloud in her grief.

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All unaware of what was taking place within the borders of his own establishment, Mir Yacoob, wearing the dress of his country, drove to the mosque. Like a faithful follower of the Prophet, he joined in the usual prayers, confessing his faith in God and in His Prophet, and giving praise to the Almighty. Afterwards he listened to the reading of the Koran. This was followed by a sermon preached by the Moola from the steps of the pulpit. As he fixed his eye on the figure of the preacher and the staff of office he held in his hand, the prince's thoughts wandered homewards to the woman who was soon to be his wife. He heard the familiar opening sentences: "Praise be to God, the King, the Holy, the Great, the Knower"; he heard the catalogue of rewards for the faithful who fulfilled their duties; the exhortation to continuous prayer, and to constant reading of the Koran. The sermon concluded with an invocation of blessings upon the Prophet and other Mohammedan saints, and the pronunciation of curses upon unbelievers.

The service did not finish here. There was a short interval, and the Moola, according to custom, gave a second sermon. It was very much like the first, to which it seemed an appendix; both were delivered in Arabic.

When the service was over, the worshippers left the mosque in an orderly manner, very much as a congregation leaves a church in England. The rain was already descending in torrents, and there was a little delay in the seeking of shoes and palm-leaf umbrellas

outside the mosque. The Moola begged the prince to take shelter in his humble dwelling close by. Mir Yacoob accepted the invitation, as he had a little business to transact. He wanted to say something about a gift which he was desirous of making as a kind of thank-offering on the occasion of his marriage.

"Prayer carries us half-way to God; fasting brings us to the door of His palace; alms procure us an admission," said the Moola, as he prepared to take down the prince's instructions regarding the gift.

When matters were satisfactorily arranged, the Moola offered his guest some coffee and rice-cakes, which were accepted, with Mir Yacoob's usual courtesy.

"The rain seems to have abated slightly. I will take my leave, as I have a friend to see on my way back," said Mir Yacoob, putting down his cup.

The carriage was called, and he departed. It was two o'clock before he reached his house, by which time the clouds had lifted, and the rain had decreased considerably. But the weather was broken; the drought was at an end, and there would be more downpour later on. The blessed rain had come to save the crops and the cattle, life-giving, life-saving, and, alas! did he but know it, life-destroying. But he did not know it, and in his ignorance he looked up at the clouds, lifting a grateful heart to Allah, and breathing a prayer that the promise of more might be fulfilled.

The horses, fine strong beasts though they were, had enough to do to drag the carriage over the muddy roads. The carriage was his mother's; he had borrowed it so that Lorina might have the brougham. He could trust his own servants better than he could trust his mother's; he had deputed his old peon to



accompany her, and bring him back the welcome news that his best-beloved was safe under the collector's roof. The roads were not only muddy but flooded. In places there was a foot of water, and his progress was slow. But the time did not hang heavily on his hands. Pleasant thoughts occupied his mind, and visions of his future life at Hyderabad came before his eyes, beguiling the journey, and making him oblivious to the tediousness of the drive.

Arrived at his house, he went straight up to his room, waving aside a servant who stepped forward to speak. Not one of the frightened crew desired to be the bearer of ill-tidings; they all hung back with the cowardly wish to put off the evil moment. He was anxious to get rid of the long Mussulman coat —which, since his residence in England, reminded him so much of the dressing-gown — and exchange it for the quiet costume of an English gentleman. The robes of his own nation for a man of his rank were of satin or velvet embroidered in gold: beside seeming pretentious in their gorgeousness, they were actually uncomfortable.

He intended to take breakfast and lunch in one meal, as he had been so long delayed, and, if the rain cleared sufficiently, to drive over to the collector's in time for afternoon tea. He had been invited to stay to dinner, an invitation which was gladly accepted. Lorina was there, of course, by this time, comfortably and safely settled under the protection of her own countryman. The rain would not have delayed her, he was sure of that, as he had given the old peon strict injunctions to let nothing prevent, or even delay, her departure. These thoughts passed through his mind as he went swiftly towards his room.

It was a plainly furnished chamber, just such as he

had occupied in England, except that the iron and brass bedstead stood in an arched recess, a kind of ante-room. A punkah hung over the bed, and a folding-screen stood in the archway. On the opposite side of the room there was a door leading into a writing or sitting-room where Mir Yacoob usually took his early morning tea.

He pulled off his embroidered coat, and threw it across the back of a chair. Before he could loosen the fine white muslin under-garment, which is often worn by the Mohammedans as an outer coat, or with only a waistcoat over it, a sound in the recess arrested his attention. He strode towards the spot, passing behind the screen, and was confronted by a veiled figure, wrapped from head to foot in the cloth of a slave. With an exclamation of anger and annoyance he laid his hand roughly on the cloth, and wrenched it aside. It was the intrusion which he resented. It would have been an act of audacity even on the part of a favourite slave; and he had no favourites.

"Huzoor! Huzoor! Pardon, Huzoor!" cried a voice he knew.

The cloth fell from his fingers.

"Lalbee!" he exclaimed.

Again she repeated her cry.

"Huzoor! Mercy, Huzoor!"

He was speechless with astonishment. After a brief pause, he said:

"You know very well what this means. The woman who breaks her gosha merits divorce; and that is what you must expect at the hands of your husband. Have you taken leave of your senses that you thus bring disgrace on us all? Why are you here?"

He spoke sternly and angrily, and the girl shrank before him, trembling.



"Huzoor, pardon! The English lady is missing. I love her. She has been a sister to me, and I fear——"

He seized her by the wrist.

"What! The lady missing? What do you mean? Take care how you trifle with me!"

She narrated the events of the morning—of the search, and how Dowluth had said that Lorina had left the harem grounds after early morning tea.

"And why have you, of all people, thought it necessary to seek me? Couldn't any one of the others have told me the tale without the necessity of your bringing disgrace on the house?"

"Huzoor, I could trust none of them. Dowluth lies; Cassim lies; the woman at the gate lies. They hate her, and would kill her.

"And how was it that you were able to pass the woman at the gate without being seen?"

"Whilst they were all searching for Lorina I wrapped myself in this slave's cloth, and passed the guard of the gate unnoticed with the market-women."

He stood for a moment perplexed. His anger still burned, and his words were harsh, for she had committed a grave offence.

"What have you to tell me that could not be told by the others?"

"Something that those who know will hide from you."

She glanced round the room.

"Come here and tell me what you have to say."

He led the way into the sitting-room, closing the door and locking it, mindful still of the gosha she had so rashly broken.

"Huzoor, I saw the lady in the garden this morning; but I and my children did not go to her; it was Friday, and the time of prayer. I stayed away from prayer to

watch, for I feared. Oh! I feared evil. Dowluth, too, stayed away from prayer; she, too, watched from behind the bushes near the house. By-and-by the lady walked to the well. It was not raining then. She returned quickly and went into the house. When she came back she carried a candle. She hastened towards the well. I saw her with my own eyes from the window of my room which overlooks the garden. She went down the steps to the passage, and, Huzoor!"—Lalbee dropped her voice,—"she has never come back. Of that I feel sure; and Dowluth knows it too, though she tells us all that she saw her go out of the harem door."

"Has the passage been dry lately?" he asked, controlling himself.

"It has, and every morning the lady has played with my little ones, running often down the steps and hiding from them, and then returning. Only yesterday she stayed so long that we thought she must have been lost. But she returned."

"And if she returned then, why cannot she return now?"

"Because, Huzoor, Dowluth has caused the sluice-door to be shut; and she has sent the gardener away who shut it."

"She cannot be there. Even if she went into the passage, why should she stay there?"

He would not believe her tale.

"She has so often said that she would one day search the jewel-chamber. She had no fear of the evil spirits that haunt the chamber. When I saw her with the candle I knew what she meant to do; she is entrapped —caught."

He uttered a curse. He knew better than anyone what courage Lorina possessed, and her love of adventure. The probability of Lalbee's words was not



to be denied. But, if her words were true, there was no time to be lost.

"Stay where you are," he said.

He left the room, and in an incredibly short time he returned, dressed in a tweed suit.

"Huzoor, the water has risen half-way to the top of the passage in our tank. I have been out in the rain to see for myself. It is impossible to reach her from that side. The only hope of escape lies on this. I have heard that the passage leads to a tank covered with a building which is hidden in the jungle-growth of your garden."

"And where is it? How am I to find it?" he demanded, impatiently.

"Ask the old peon whose daughter waits on the lady; he will know, for he and his father before him served the family here."

"And you? what is to be done about you?"

"Ah! never mind me. If divorce is to be my fate, it is Allah's will, and I will accept it. Only save the lady, for her sake and for yours. But you must hasten. Oh! leave me and go; go, Huzoor, and Allah grant that you may find her safe."

She sank upon her knees, and covered her face with her hands. He looked at her for a moment in silence, and the sternness passed from his face.

"Lalbee, you have served us well, and you deserve a better fate. Would that Allah had given you a son. Perchance you might still have been your husband's honoured and dearly-loved wife. Preserve your gosha in the eyes of the household if you can; I will not betray you."

With a regretful glance at the crushed figure at his feet, he turned and left her. There was no time to linger when, perhaps, a life depended on the speed with

which he could reach his dearly beloved. He hurried away, calling for his peon, and almost ran against Mrs Russel. He did not stay to listen to her story; the moments were too precious.

"Yes; I know, I have been told all. I am going in search of her."

The old peon came quickly to his call; the other servants crowded round, ready and eager to render service. They all knew of the catastrophe which had happened. He signed to them to retire, and they withdrew, standing in whispering groups and watching for the signal to be of use.

"I have reason to believe that the English lady is in the jewel-chamber of the harem garden. Do you know the chamber?"

"Certainly, sahib."

"Is there any way to it from here?"

"There was at one time; but the Shahzada your grandfather—may the Prophet guard his sepulchre!—had the stairs broken away."

"Lead the way quickly. Let me see it."

"The key, sahib. The tank-house is always kept locked."

"Where is the key?"

"In your room; it hangs on the wall by your bed."

Mir Yacoob remembered having seen some keys hanging there. Mindful of Lalbee's presence he ran upstairs himself to fetch it. He glanced into the sitting-room; it was empty; she had vanished as mysteriously as she had come.

"Now, lead on!" he cried, as he reached the old man's side. "I don't even know where this opening is, I have lived so little here in my life. Quick!"

The thought of her peril maddened him, and the peon had a difficulty in keeping up with his master.



The way was through a side passage, open to the weather, which brought them into a jungly part of the garden, where the hybiscus and oleanders had been allowed to grow unpruned. Hidden in this luxuriant growth was a narrow path which cut into the very centre of the thick vegetation, and brought them to a small outhouse.

The lock was rusty, and the key resisted the old man's effort to open it. The prince took it from him impetuously, and the more vigorous fingers of the younger man wrenched it round. The door creaked stiffly on its rusty hinges, and slowly gave way to the pressure. There was a small stone platform, and below was a well of water into which a stream poured noisily from a spout high up in the masonry.

The two men peered down into its depths and the peon seized his master's arm.

"There, Huzoor! Look! See, there is the opening of the passage. It is half filled with water."

Their eyes were getting used to the dim light which penetrated the honeycombed tile-work.

"And see! There is the lady!"

Mir Yacoob's heart bounded with a strange mixture of feelings—relief that he had found her, fear lest she should be already dying or dead, and savage anger against the person who had wrought this evil. He was recalled to his senses by the old man's voice at his elbow.

"Sahib, how are we to save her?"

"Go and get help—ropes—call the syces, the watermen, the gardeners—bring a ladder. Quick—run as you have never run before; and great shall be the reward of the man who saves her."

Before the peon could turn to go he saw his master plunge into the black depths below. It was sufficient.

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One great fact, however,
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CHAPTER XII

THE SEARCH FOR LALBEE

"Drink waters out of thine own cistern, and running waters out of thine own well."—SOLOMON.

IT is no easy matter to lift a person from a well when the well has no pulley nor beam for drawing water. But the watermen and gardeners of an Indian establishment are men of resources where a tank is concerned, besides being excellent swimmers. With men below in the water, and a small company of powerful peons above, the prince and Lorina were drawn safely to the top. It was not the work of a moment, however; and before he was extricated Mir Yacoob felt the chill of the well-water strike through him.

Mrs Russel received her charge with tearful gladness. She wrung the sodden skirts which clung around Lorina's benumbed limbs, and rubbed her clammy hands. Strange to say, the girl was not feeling the cold so much as the fatigue and exhaustion of the immersion. Mrs Russel would have hurried her away to the harem at once; but Lorina refused to stir from the spot until she had seen her deliverer safely drawn up and standing beside her. He glanced eagerly into her face, and she smiled at him, placing her hand within his. He passed his arm round her waist, and led her from the outhouse towards the harem gate. There he relinquished his place to a slave-woman, who had enveloped herself entirely in her red cloth to keep off the damp. As the

prince withdrew and allowed the other to take his place he whispered:

"See to her, Lalbee, that she has everything that she wants; and stay with her till she gives you permission to go."

The slave bent her head in token that she heard, but made no reply. Then he returned to Mrs Russel.

"I must go back to my house and get rid of these wet clothes."

He shivered with the premonitory symptoms of ague and fever; his face had grown pale with ivory tints, and there was on it the haggard, anxious look which of late he had worn so often. Mrs Russel left Lorina's side, and looked into his face.

"You have fever coming on; this is the ague that goes before it."

"I am afraid so."

His teeth chattered as she spoke.

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes; write to Major Fawcett, and ask him to come and see me at once. He has treated me before for fever, and will be able to put me right in twenty-four hours. Do you think he ought to see Lorina?"

"That I shall find out presently. She is strong, and has not been in the country long enough to get any fever into her system yet, so I hope she may escape. I am more afraid of the shock than of the cold bath. I wonder how she got there."

Again he was shaken by ague.

"You must go to bed at once—hot bottles and blankets, until the skin acts. Shall I come and look after you?"

"No, thanks; my servants will do all that is necessary. Send the note to Major Fawcett by a syce. Order whatever you want for Lorina through my old peon,



who shall be on duty outside the harem gate; and let me have a line presently to say how she is."

He went back to his house, where the servants met him with a big bowl of hot coffee. Being a Mussulman, he would not touch alcohol. In another ten minutes he was shivering under a pile of warm blankets, resigning himself to his fate of twelve hours fever. He would be fortunate, indeed, if it lasted no longer. With Major Fawcett's assistance he hoped that the attack might be subdued, and that there would no return of it on the following day. Whilst the fever was upon him he could not raise his head from the pillow. The memory of the danger in which he had found his beloved did not tend to calm his excited nerves. Perhaps it was as well that it was physically impossible for him to visit the harem at that moment. If he had had any proof of the complicity of Dowluth in what had happened there is no telling what might have happened. His patience had a limit, and that limit was reached now, as he tossed and turned from side to side with aching head and limbs, muttering wild curses in his native tongue. Again and again he seemed to be battling with the waters. White arms clung to him, and carried him down into the deeps. He heard her cry again and again, until at last sleep came to give peace and rest.

Lorina was very still and quiet during the ministrations of Mrs Russel. The stiff glass of hot brandy and water had a marvellous effect on her young English blood. A warm bath and some food finished the work of revival. Mrs Russel was anxious to put her to bed; but Lorina would not hear of such a thing. All she seemed to desire was to be left to herself. She made all sorts of excuses to dispense with the services of the good lady, but without success. As she came

back for the twentieth time with some fresh solicitations and advice, Lorina firmly but kindly refused to let her enter the room. Standing before the door, which she held ajar behind her, she said:

"I assure you that I am all right. Of course, I have had a nasty fright. I quite made up my mind at one time that I was to drown. Yet, somehow, I never gave up all hope of Mir Yacoob coming. I felt sure that he would hear me sooner or later, and come to my help, if only I could hold out."

"It is very wonderful how he guessed where you were. I don't yet understand how it was that he suspected that you were still in the passage. I went to the tank through the pouring rain to look for you; and I called down the passage, and you were there all the time—why didn't you answer?"

Mrs Russel was becoming querulous, now that her anxiety was at an end.

"The sluice-doors were shut, and I could not hear you."

"Who shut them? Dowluth knew that you were there. She should have seen that the gardeners kept the doors open till you returned."

Lorina was silent. She knew nothing for certain, but dark suspicions filled her mind. The many warnings she had received were bearing fruit, and her eyes were at last opened to certain facts. She was morally sure that an attempt had been made upon her life, an attempt which had well-nigh been successful. All this time she had stood patiently before her door without inviting Mrs Russel to enter.

"I am going to ask you to leave me for an hour to rest. I wish to be alone and undisturbed. It is now half-past four o'clock. Bring me some tea at half-past five, and I shall be grateful."



"I don't like leaving you. Supposing you faint or feel ill."

Lorina laughed with something of her old gaiety.

"Give me your hand-bell, and if any such unlikely event seems impending I will ring."

Mrs Russel had to be content with this arrangement. She went to her room, which was near, and lay down on her bed. The poor soul was, to all appearances, far more upset by what had happened than the chief actors themselves. She heard the girl close and lock her door. The letter to the medical officer had been despatched, and a note with reassuring news of Lorina had been sent by the old peon to his master, telling him that Major Fawcett's services would not be required for Miss Carlyon.

The rain ceased, and though heavy clouds still hung about the sky, full of promise for a wet night, the sun burst through the veil of vapour to bid good-evening to the rejoicing earth. A black robin fluttered amongst the drenched scarlet blossom of some cannas in the garden below, and poured forth his little song of thanksgiving. The crows were busy over a feast of caterpillars and grubs, served up by the floods on platters of smooth gravel drift. A venturesome butterfly fluttered forth from its shelter under the zinnias, and dried its wings in a golden ray of sunshine. Someone knocked at Mrs Russel's door, which was ajar.

"Come in," she cried, in English.

Dowluth crept into the room. Her face was haggard with anxiety, and her eyes were restless with a terror she could not disguise. Mrs Russel sprang from her bed in alarm.

"What is the matter? Is anything wrong with the prince?" she asked, with sudden apprehension.

"He has fever still, but it is nothing, it will soon

pass. Lalbee is gone! We cannot find her anywhere. Oh, lady, pity us! tell us where she is."

"Bless the woman! I don't know where she is," replied Mrs Russel, irritably.

"We can't find her anywhere. She is gone—gone!"

"How should I know where she is gone! I should have told you long ago if I had known."

Dowluth wrung her hands in despair.

"We thought that she might have followed after the English lady, and that she would be found with her."

"But Miss Carlyon was alone until the prince went to her. She had no companion."

"Oh, lady, be kind to us! be merciful! Lalbee is the apple of our eyes in the harem. The Beebee is overwhelmed with grief. Give our beloved one back to us, and we will only ask that you and yours may go in peace."

"How can I give what I have not got? Miss Carlyon was alone in the well. If Lalbee had been there she would have died with fright. Not many English girls would have gone through what Miss Carlyon did with such courage. You must seek elsewhere for Lalbee. Have you searched the other house?"

"She has not passed the gate, of that I am sure. None but slaves have gone in and out. Besides, she would not dare to do such a thing, as it would break her gosha.

"Then I can only say, search again. How was it that the sluice-doors were shut?"

Mrs Russel looked at the old woman, who quailed before her scrutiny. The lie was ready, however.

"The gardener lowered the doors, without telling us what he had done. Besides, who could say that the lady was there after the rain began? Did we



not all think that at the first sound of the warning thunder she would return to the house?"

"And so would Lalbee, of course. Have you any enemies who would kidnap her, and keep her forcibly in hiding?"

The suggestion was new, and Dowluth began to turn over in her mind all the possible enemies there might be, who would take vengeance on the house if they could. The person upon whom her suspicions had more than once been fixed was the mother of the child who had been ill-treated. Yet she had received certain information that the woman had departed with the child from the village, and had gone to another district. Still, she might have friends left behind, and it was possible that these had sworn to take vengeance.

Finding that there was no more to be got out of Mrs Russel than repeated assurances of her entire ignorance concerning Lalbee, Dowluth went away to make crafty, veiled inquiries concerning secret enemies. She had her own way of conducting such inquiries. Like her methods of punishment, they were not pleasant, and savoured more of mediæval times than of the enlightened period of the present day. Mrs Russel was about to lie down again, as the prescribed hour was not quite up, when Lorina's bell rang sharply. She ran hastily to her door. Lorina opened it, even as she knocked, and confronted her. The colour had come back to the girl's cheek, and her eyes were bright with suppressed excitement.

"Mrs Russel, order the prince's brougham at once. Tell them to get it ready as quickly as possible."

"The brougham?" ejaculated the surprised lady.

"Yes, the brougham. I am going to Mrs Cunliffe's. It was arranged that I should go to-day. I was to



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When Mrs Russel returned, Lorina with feverish haste was putting together a few things for the night. The sun had forsaken the dripping earth, and had hidden himself—a red ball of fire—in a pillow of grey cloud low in the west. The short twilight of the tropics was upon them, and night was fast approaching, though it was not yet six o'clock. A slave-woman, with her back to Mrs Russel, was bending over a bag fastening the last strap.

"Can I help?" asked Mrs Russel, coming in fussily.

"I have all I want, thanks," said Lorina, quickly stepping in front of her, and arresting her progress. "To-morrow, if the rain holds up in the morning, please send over my heavy luggage. See, here are my keys. Lock up my boxes for me; and just look round to be sure that I have forgotten nothing. Good-bye, dear Mrs Russel. Take care of yourself. We shall meet again on Monday, if not before. Now, ayah, bring the bag down with you; make haste."

She kissed Mrs Russel, who by this time was quite bewildered, took up her dressing-case, and calling again impatiently to the slave-woman, went quickly from the room, followed by her attendant.

Mrs Russel stood in the middle of the room, with the keys in her hands, uncertain whether she should go after Lorina, and see her safe into the carriage, or stay behind to lock up. The latter course seemed the more important. Before she had fastened the last travelling trunk, she heard the wheels of the brougham roll away. A sigh of relief escaped her lips.

"Thank Heaven, the child is safely off at last, and clear of this dreadful place. Now we have only two more days to wait, to-morrow and Sunday, before

she will be in the prince's own keeping. Dear me! I never thought that I should be so anxious to see her married to him. When once she is his wife, he will be able to guard her from all accidents. Accidents, indeed!" she laughed, scornfully. "Yet we couldn't prove them to be anything but accidents. Oh, I hope he will be well by Monday! However, the responsibility of the girl's safety no longer rests with me. It lies with the collector, and no one can harm her now."

Thus, talking to herself for company's sake, she finished her task, and went downstairs to the sitting-room. The table-attendant brought the lamp, and spent some minutes in a fruitless search for the second candlestick, little guessing that it was lying behind one of the sluice-doors. The clouds had gathered, and rain was beginning to descend again with a steadiness which extinguished all fear of famine and drought in the land for this season. The room was silent without the presence of Lorina. From a distant wing there came faintly the sound of women weeping. Mrs Russel could guess what it meant; yet, for all that, she asked of the attendant who was setting the table:

"What is wrong in the harem?"

"The lady Lalbee is lost, drowned in the garden tank, it is said; but they cannot find her body because at present the water covers all. The Beebee weeps; the ladies, her daughters, weep; the children weep; but more than all the rest Dowluth mourns, and none can comfort her. She says strange words, and seems like a woman bereft of her senses. No one understands what she means, not even the Beebee."

"What is it she says?"

"She talks continually of retribution. Then she



curses as though a demon stood before her. But she is an evil woman, the daughter of dogs, when she deals with the slaves. May Allah's curse descend upon her! She has driven the lady Lalbee away by her own wickedness."

Mrs Russel looked up sharply. They were speaking in the native tongue, which she always preferred to use with the servants.

"You don't think the lady Lalbee is drowned, then?"

"Nay, how should I, a poor know-nothing, be able to say? I am no wiser than a fool. The lady Lalbee is good, like your young lady. May the favour of the Prophet be on both of them, wherever their steps may lead them! Madam, the dinner is served."

Mrs Russel sat down to her solitary meal, a load of care removed from her mind as she thought of Lorina. The disappearance of Lalbee, of whom she had seen scarcely anything, did not trouble her. She had quite enough to think about without worrying herself over the affairs of the harem, which did not concern her. Neither her peace of mind nor her rest that night were in any way disturbed, though there were times when the mourning of the household fell on her ear.

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Lorina, dining alone with her kind host and hostess, made an excellent meal, all things considered. Mr Cunliffe noted the fact with undisguised satisfaction.

"For a girl who has been nearly drowned, to say nothing of having escaped being crushed under an iron door, you look remarkably well, Miss Carlyon," he said.

"Perhaps I scarcely realise all the dangers I have so miraculously escaped," she replied.

The colour still burned in her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled. She certainly had not the appearance of a woman who had been brought face to face with death within the last twelve hours. The tale of her rescue had been told; but it was so wonderful in its details that it required re-telling more than once. And now, as she concluded, she cried:

"My brave prince! I owe him my life! He plunged into the well without a moment's hesitation. I owe him my life."

Her eyes softened with a sudden moisture. She was deeply moved.

"He has earned your gratitude, and, indeed, your love," said Mrs Cunliffe.

"He has earned both! He deserves both! But, alas! we don't get all we deserve."

The collector glanced at her with a swift scrutiny, peculiar to that government officer. Was it possible, after all that had happened, that the girl's heart was untouched? Was she still in love with the idea, as his wife had said, and not with the man? She must have a heart of stone to accept such a service from one who was so soon to be her husband, without giving something more than perfunctory gratitude. He was not anxious to see her the wife of a Mohammedan, even though the man was a prince, and an exceptionally fine fellow. But he would prefer that to the discovery that she possessed no heart at all. He said, therefore, with some warmth:

"Mir Yacoob will have his reward on Monday when you bestow your hand, and, I trust, your heart upon him."

He looked for a response, for some sign that the softer emotion was not altogether absent; but there was none. The smile died from her face, and she



sank into deep thought. The collector exchanged a glance with his wife, giving the slightest possible shrug to his shoulders. There was silence for a while, which at length Lorina broke.

"Mrs Russel told me that the prince had an attack of fever. It was brought on by the plunge into the tank."

"A very probable thing to happen. There is nothing so likely to give fever as a sudden cold bath. If you had lived as many months in the country as you have lived days, you would have had it. You may consider yourself very fortunate, Miss Carlyon, in more ways than one."

"How long does fever last?"

"A few hours—a few days. One can never say for certain."

"How soon may I hope to see Mir Yacoob?"

"On Sunday or Monday, if the attack is only slight."

"Monday is the day I leave."

"Yes; your train goes in the evening. It is the Bombay mail. It branches off at a junction for Hyderabad."

"By the way, how did the prince know where to look for you, when others were apparently in such complete ignorance?" asked Mrs Cunliffe, who, with a feminine wonder that had not yet burned itself out, had been thinking over Lorina's story.

The girl paused before replying.

"I have not had any conversation with Mir Yacoob on the subject; but I believe that some one of the many people belonging to him told him of the entrance to the passage from his garden, and suggested that I might have gone to explore the jewel-chamber. There is a faithful old peon, who is

devoted to his master. His daughter has been my personal attendant; Mir Yacoob chose her as being perfectly trustworthy. I think it was the peon who led his master to the tank."

"That is the woman you have upstairs, I suppose. I sent her up some food. She is a Mohammedan, I see."

"The old peon is a Mohammedan."

"Your discovery in the jewel-chamber was very ghastly," said Mrs Cunliffe, unable to keep away from the subject.

Her husband observed Lorina shudder. He said, quickly:

"We must forget these things; it doesn't do to dwell upon them, for at present we cannot remedy them. The purdah has hidden many tragedies in India, and the time has not yet arrived when it can be lifted."

"And must it always be so?" asked Lorina.

"No, it need not be; but reform must come from within, and not from without. At present they don't want the purdah lifted. You are going to try to teach them to think differently, Miss Carlyon. Whether you will be successful or not, God only knows."

"I have learnt many things during my short stay here. One of them is to distrust myself as a teacher. It was a mistake to go to the harem as I did."

"Don't call it a mistake. We never talk of anything as a mistake in India. It doesn't do to regret an action in this country, though someone has called it a land of regrets."

"I don't regret what I have done. I have learnt things which it was absolutely necessary that I should know before I linked my fate with Mir



Yacoob's, and I could have learnt them by no other means. Yet I know now that the harem, with all its intrigues, is no place for me."

"What have you learnt?" he asked, bending his searching gaze upon her.

"Something which you must hear after I have seen the prince. Until then my lips are sealed."

Mrs Cunliffe looked up in undisguised curiosity; but a glance at her husband's face warned her to keep silence and ask no questions.

"I am always ready to listen, and I shall be very glad if I can save you from taking any further steps which may lead to your discomfort."

"You carefully avoid calling them mistakes," she replied, with a smile. "No; I am sure that my next step will not be a mistake. I know what I am about this time."

To say that Lorina felt the same after her adventure as before would be untrue; yet, by her brave bearing, she showed nothing, and the careless observer would never have guessed that she had been through so terrible an ordeal. She preserved her courage and her spirit even in the privacy of her own room. But at night, when sleep closed her eyes, the brain played all sorts of tricks. The scenes recurred with every possible variation, and with a vividness which made them horribly real. She saw again the skeleton of the jewel-chamber, the falling iron door, the creeping water alive with crawling insect life. And she awoke on the morning of Saturday, unrefreshed, and with an aching head.

A letter from Mrs Russel told her that the prince was better. He sent messages to the effect that he hoped to be able to call and see her on Sunday morning. He particularly enjoined Mrs Russel to say

that he begged Lorina would retain the services of the woman-attendant for the present. She was not required in the harem again. The harem, Mrs Russel wrote, was in a terrible state of despair. Lalbee could not be found. The well in the garden had been searched, and her white muslin cloth, which she had worn on the morning of that day, had been discovered. The whole household was plunged into a state of mourning, and there was wailing and crying all day long, and half the night. The only person who seemed indifferent was the prince himself. His mother had sent to him, begging him to get up from his bed of sickness and join in the search. But he had refused point-blank, saying that he had had enough to do in rescuing the English lady. It seemed rather heartless, concluded Mrs Russel, but her sympathies were with the prince. What more could be done than had been already done? With the rain still coming down, it would be madness for a man racked with fever to venture out.

Lorina was not sorry to spend the day in semi-invalidism. The peacefulness of the Anglo-Indian household, after the harem with its restless espionage, did more to restore her than any medicine she could have taken. The noiseless, perfectly-trained servants, the cleanliness of the house, the thoroughly English character of its furniture and appointments were a revelation to the girl, who had only experienced Indian life in the household of a native lady. It had a soothing effect on her excited brain.

But there was still one thing she desired, with a beating heart, and that was to see her prince.



CHAPTER XIII

AN ORDEAL

"Even a coondrimany seed has a black spot."—*Tamil proverb of the small red seeds of the* Abrus precatorius *used as weights by Indian jewellers.*

SUNDAY morning was fine and glorious. The clouds rolled away. The sun rose in a clear, bright sky. He was lavish with his warm kisses; and bud and leaf responded, unfolding visibly in the morning air. The flowers and shrubs still glistened with crystal drops. New blossoms opened their petals, and hid the destruction wrought by yesterday's torrent. Robins and barbets chanted their songs of praise for the feast provided by a bountiful tropical nature. The green bee-eater was busy in the sunshine amongst the winged insects; and the white stork-like paddy-bird waded contentedly in pools left standing about the grassy compound. Butterflies, without which no Indian garden is complete, displayed their beautiful metallic tints, unsullied by last night's rain, as they hovered over the opening flowers.

Lorina was up early, and out in the garden before her host and hostess. Early tea was laid beneath the shade of an old banyan, whose many stems formed a miniature forest. Mr and Mrs Cunliffe appeared presently, ready dressed for church.

"We are going to the eight o'clock service this morning," said Mrs Cunliffe, as she poured out the tea. "We shall be back to breakfast at ten. I did

not ask you to go with us as I thought you would be too tired. But you look wonderfully well."

"And so I feel, I am glad to say."

"Still, I think you had better remain at home, as most probably the prince will drive over to see you this morning."

"I should be sorry to miss him; I want to see him."

"I daresay you do," replied Mrs Cunliffe, with a smile. "You have to thank him, of course, for risking his life for you. Will you give him an invitation from me to stay to breakfast? Or, if he has to leave before breakfast, tell him we shall be very pleased to see him to dinner."

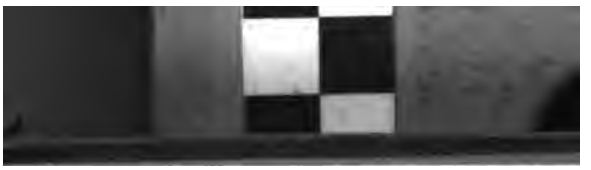
Lorina made no response, somewhat to Mrs Cunliffe's surprise. That lady had expected thanks, and perhaps a heightening of the colour at the mention of the prince. But nothing of the kind was forthcoming. The carriage came round when the early breakfast was over; and the collector and his wife drove away towards the little cantonment church.

"The girl puzzles me completely. There is a curious reserve about her sometimes. At other moments she is open and outspoken to abruptness," remarked Mr Cunliffe.

"She has had a shock. Though she carries it so well, I am sure that more has happened than we have yet learnt; and that something has shaken her faith in herself," replied Mrs Cunliffe.

Her husband laughed.

"I think my faith in the harem would have been shaken by this time, if I had gone through her experience. There have been, undoubtedly, two attempts, at least, on her life. For some unknown reason they have both miscarried and failed, thank God!"



"Do you think her life will be attempted again?"

"Not if she keeps clear of the harem; and if she is careful not to come between him and his mother's household. His visits must continue; but hers, unless she is accompanied by him, should cease."

Mrs Cunliffe glanced at her husband. There was an unspoken query in her look, which he understood and partly answered.

"The less she asks about the doings in the harem the better. It will not be the women's fault if her peace of mind, and her faith in her husband are preserved. It would be for the happiness of both if they would return to England, and make their home there."

"Do you think she knows all their practices? Do you think she already suspects how her husband may be tempted?"

"It is that which puzzles me. I am inclined to believe that her suspicions are aroused. She is a high-spirited woman. She will not put up with any injustice or infidelity."

Lorina wandered about the garden for a short time, and then went into the boudoir which adjoined the drawing-room. Mrs Cunliffe usually sat there, as it was more private than the larger room. It opened into a fern-house, whence the tender green of the palms and ferns reflected a cool, subdued light. She took up a book to read; but her attention wandered. She could not sit still, she moved restlessly about the room, finding her way often into the verandah. Her eye swept the tree-bound horizon in search of a coming visitor. She had not long to wait. A dogcart turned into the compound, and she recognised in the driver the prince. Calling the servant she told him to show the visitor into the smaller room, whither

she retired. She took up her position by a large open door leading into the fernery. Clothed, as usual, in snowy muslin, with an abundance of white embroidery, lace, and ribbons, she seemed all that an expectant lover could desire. Yet the expression on her face was not that of a happy bride awaiting the coming of her lord. There was a new softness in her eye, and gentleness about her mouth, but there was also a sadness which had not been there before.

He came with the eagerness, but not the confidence, that an accepted lover has a right to assume. He had yet to learn how his queen took this last insult, this outrage upon her person, which she had suffered at the hands of one of his own people in his mother's house.

Repressing his eagerness, he moved slowly towards her, with the dignity and grace of his noble birth, which was so natural to him.

She did not advance to meet him, but stood motionless, her eyes fixed gravely upon his. Her attitude awed him. He took her hand, and bent over it to kiss it, waiting for her to speak. Her words were trivial and commonplace, as words usually are when they cover deep emotions.

"You have been able to drive yourself this morning, which shows that you are better."

"The fever did not last long; it was only a slight attack. You escaped, I was glad to hear. Have you suffered much from all you went through?"

"He watched her with some apprehension. His quick, sensitive nature felt that there was a barrier rising between them. Whether it was from his own inner consciousness, or whether it arose from some new phase of sentiment on her side, he could not tell. It troubled him, and arrested the words that



were on his lips. He wanted to beg her forgiveness for the ill that had been done; but his instinct told him that the moment had not yet come. She replied, quickly, and with a brightness which savoured of hardness:

"Oh no, thanks; I have not suffered in the least. I took no harm from my cold bath, and I have got over the fright. I was very frightened at one time."

"You were very brave," he said, with some warmth.

"It would not have done if I had given way to fear—if I had fainted in the jewel-chamber, for instance. You know what I saw there?"

"I have yet to hear the story of your adventures why you went, and how you escaped. Do you think you can bear to tell me the tale?"

"Yes; you shall hear the story from beginning to end. I have already told it to Mr and Mrs Cunliffe."

She sat down, and signed to him to do the same. He took a seat where he could see her profile against the greenery of the ferns, and watch the mobile lips as they spoke. Her eyes wandered away from his; and she half turned from him, almost forgetting his presence, as she painted the different scenes—her visit to the jewel-chamber, her imprisonment behind the first iron door, and her escape to the outlet through the second.

He let her finish, only once uttering an exclamation. It was when she mentioned the fact of Dowluth having seen her before she descended the steps to the well. Something like a curse fell from his lips at the mention of the woman's name.

"And when I reached the second well, where you found me, hope once more filled my heart. I called for you, and you did not fail me. Mir Yacoob, I owe you my life. Whether an attempt was made on my

life or not, I do not know; I shall never forget, dear friend, that you saved it; and, without you, I should now be lying dead beneath the water. I thank you with my whole heart.

She turned towards him, and her voice softened and faltered as she uttered the concluding words. His ear was not slow to catch the change, and it moved him strangely.

"My queen! you forgive? My deed has expiated the sins of my household, and you feel no anger?" he said, with a deep gladness."

"Anger?" she replied, looking at him with a sorrow he had never seen on that bright, happy, beautiful face before, "No; I am not angry. I am troubled; I am grieved."

"My devotion shall atone. To-morrow—Ah! to-morrow! how I wish it were here! To-morrow I shall take you into my keeping, and none shall have power to hurt you again."

He rose to his feet in agitation, deeply moved. She involuntarily followed his example. Her breath came in gasps; twice she tried to speak, but failed. Words were uttered at last, brokenly, sadly.

"Ah! dear friend! that can never be. Our marriage can never be!"

He gazed at her like a man in a dream. He could not believe that he heard aright.

"To-morrow! to-morrow! my wife!"

He stretched out his hands towards her; but she made a gesture to keep him where he was, until she had explained herself clearly. His cry wrung her heart, and tears filled her eyes, as she continued:

"I can never be your wife. O Yacoob! Don't you know our English law? You have lived long enough in England to have learnt it! What madness



filled your heart, and made you believe that you, having a wife already, could marry again?"

He bowed his head before her, silent and stricken.

"You can never be the husband of an English-woman."

Again she paused; but he had no reply ready. His silence disturbed her; it seemed an admission of guilt. She had expected excuse; nay, a possible contradiction of her accusation; for she had only the word of one woman for the foundation of her terrible statement.

"Surely you were asked before we were married in London if any such impediment existed? You allowed me to go through the humiliation, the disgrace, of marrying a man who already had a wife!"

Her words stung him into speech, and forced from his lips the excuse which his princely mind abhorred. Sooner than make excuses, and throw blame, rightly or wrongly, on another, the proud Oriental would have borne reproaches, or even unmerited punishment. Excuses were for slaves and cowards. But in the presence of his queen he was as a slave. She demanded an explanation, and he gave it.

"I spoke what I believed to be perfect truth when I said that no impediment existed. I did not know I had a wife."

"How could that be?"

He paused again. She was taxing his moral strength with her personal question. Yet she was only exercising her rights. With a manifest effort he told his story. It was short; and it unfolded yet another intrigue of the harem.

"When I told my mother of my intention to go to England, she asked me to marry a second wife. Even at that early time, thanks to the teachings of my English tutors, I had learnt to believe that it was best for a man

—no matter what his nationality—to have but one wife. I refused, giving her my reason. She then begged me to divorce my wife, since I would not consent to have two. But this I refused to do also; and I gave my refusal with some warmth, as such an action would have been unjust and unmerited. My wife had ever been the gentlest and most docile of women. I left Hyderabad, therefore, without pronouncing the divorce; and gave my mother plainly to understand that I should not marry a second whilst my first lived. The Begum, as you know, is an obstinate woman. She had set her heart on gaining her end. After I reached England, I received a letter from her, saying that she had effected what she wished through the kazee who had married us. My wife had divorced me on the count of desertion; and the kazee had declared the deed valid. I was therefore free, and arrangements were already being made for my second marriage with one of the daughters of Hyderabad. I was very vexed at the time. It was just before I came to stay with you. Then you came into my life. You know how things shaped themselves since that time. I believed that Allah had but used my mother as an instrument to open out a higher and a better life for me, with you by my side. Believe me, it was in the absolute faith in my freedom that I married you."

Lorina listened with astonishment to this strange tale. If the story were true—if divorce had been legally performed—she (having been married in England) was legally bound to him, whatever the Church might say. But she was not indifferent to the Church's teaching; and dismay filled her mind as she contemplated the meshes of the net in which she had entangled herself.

"Then, if that is so, how is it that she calls you husband still?"



He threw out his hands with a gesture of despair. There was yet more to tell of intrigue and deception.

"You know the ways of the harem. You can easily understand, therefore, that I was deceived. My mother lied. There was no divorce. I have learnt from the kazee quite recently, since I returned from England, that there was no application for it, nor was he consulted about it. The divorce was never even contemplated; the deception was intended to entrap me into a second marriage. I might have known that my mother was deceiving me," he said, bitterly.

"Then she is still your wife?"

"She is still my wife."

His words brought relief and consternation at the same time; and Lorina realised the gravity of the situation. Her English marriage was invalid; and the Mohammedan marriage would only be binding so long as she remained in India. In England she would be no wife at all, or, at most, the wife of a bigamist. The situation appalled her in more ways than one; for, apart from the great evil which was being wrought to herself, there was the overwhelming disappointment of discovering that her idol could be so blind to what was right and wrong as to allow matters to proceed. There was reproach in her tone, as she said, impressively, and in a manner he could not mistake:

"And you intended to go through the ceremony with me to-morrow, to wrong me and your better self at the same time, in spite of your knowledge as to how the matter stood? O Yacoob!"

She covered her face with her hands, in distress. He felt her sorrow acutely, yet the reproach stirred him still more. His pride was hurt. He was conscious that he had been a victim of deception like herself, but he was doing all in his power to remedy the evil which had



been wrought. He drew himself up proudly as he replied:

"You must not forget that I am Mohammedan; whatever may be my private opinion on the subject of re-marriage, you must bear in mind that my marriage with you to-morrow will be perfectly valid, whether I have a wife or not. But by that time I shall have no wife. Fate has been too strong for me, and the divorce, which I at one time refused to pronounce, shall be pronounced to-morrow morning before our marriage. The preliminary ceremonies have been performed, and by the time that I stand by your side before the kazee, no woman but you will have the right to call me husband."

His words did not tend to lessen the girl's distress.

"But, Yacoob!" she cried, "I can never consent to be married under such conditions. It must not be. You! you of all people! in whom I believed! You would not be so false, so unjust, as to put away a loving, faithful woman, whose fault is that she has borne you daughters instead of sons! Dear friend, believe me, it cannot be; we must give up all thought of marriage."

She sank into her chair again, and turned away. She could not bear to look at the havoc her words had wrought on the face of the man before her. During her stay in the harem she had been drawn towards him in the bonds of affection. There may not have been the passion of love, but there was something deeper than mere regard. His gentleness, his consideration, and, lastly, his unhesitating response to her call for aid, were remembered with gratitude. Her heart yearned towards him, torn to pieces as it was with the knowledge that he belonged to another. The mere thought of him as her husband now was sinful. Yet in her eyes he had been her husband ever since they had stood together and made their vows before witnesses in London three



months ago. Three months! It seemed years! And now he was no husband of hers; he was no more to her than Mr Cunliffe, the collector, whose guest she was.

Mir Yacoob gazed at her, in anguish. Then, suddenly, he took a step forward, and knelt at her feet. His pride had vanished. Nothing remained but the wordless grief of a broken heart.

"Light of my soul! Heart of my heart! you ask me too much! I cannot, I will not, live without you."

He clasped his hands round her, and bent his head upon her knee. She knew that she ought to resist him, and bid him begone; but she could not do it. An unspeakable sorrow wrung her spirit, and she was filled with a great pity. She was just; she was unsparing of herself; it had been her doing, not his, that he had dared to raise his eyes to her. It was she who had encouraged him and bade him hope.

"It cannot be; we may not marry," she reiterated, as hot tears fell from her burning eyes. At that moment, in the great pity of her heart, when she knew that he could never be anything more than a friend, she came nearer to loving the man than she had ever been before.

In the pause that followed, when both their hearts were too full to speak, there fell on their ears a rustle of soft drapery with the faint tinkle of bangles. Lorina looked up.

"Lalbee!" she exclaimed.

The prince sprang to his feet at the sound of the name. His dark eyes were illumined with a flash of anger.

"What are you doing here? Have you not wrought mischief enough already?" he said, roughly, in his own tongue.

She quailed at his words; yet her brave spirit was



not so easily extinguished. She drew her veil aside, and looked unflinchingly into his face, as she replied:

"Ay, and good too; but the evil was not of my doing. I knew nothing of the lies which Dowluth and the Beebee showered upon you. May the lies be on the heads of those who made them! And if I unwillingly wrought evil, have I not also wrought good? Twice have I saved the life of her you love. Was it not my hand that removed the poisoned cakes which Dowluth placed on the breakfast-table? May Allah punish her according to her deserts?"

Lorina, who had already heard the story from Lalbee's lips, was able to follow her speech now.

"It is true! She did indeed save my life. She saw Dowluth place the cakes there. She guessed the evil intention of the woman, and, bringing some of her own, she substituted them for the poisoned cakes, which she threw over the garden-wall. The stable children found them, poor little souls! She did not think of the little ones."

He listened in moody silence.

"And when Dowluth—may Allah send her to the seventh hell!—would have left your heart's delight to drown, did I not break my gosha, and incur your honour's anger, that I might tell you where to find her?"

Still he did not speak.

"Yes; she has done all this. If you had not known where to look for me, you could not have saved my life, Yacoob."

"And for what I have done I ask as my reward that I may be spared the misery and the disgrace of divorce. Mercy, my lord and master! Have mercy on your poor slave!"

Lorina looked at the proud, silent figure before her.



His eyes were bent upon the bowed form of his wife. There was no ray of forgiveness there; and Lorina felt that the words so longed for by the ill-used wife would not be forthcoming. She took upon herself a sponsorship for him.

"Lalbee, have no fear. It shall be as you wish. You shall not be divorced."

The girl caught her hand with extravagant delight and gratitude. She did not see her husband shudder at the words, but his action did not escape Lorina's eyes.

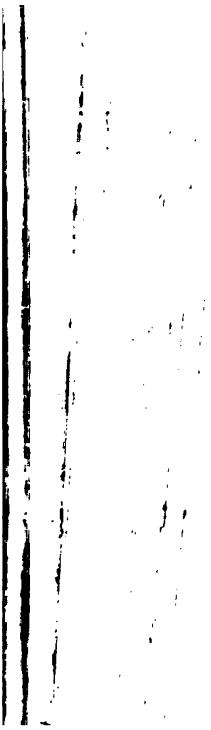
"All honour and thanks be to your wife, Yacoob; even though she has come between us and our happiness," she said, bravely.

Lalbee understood something of the purport of her words, which were spoken in English. She glanced quickly from one to the other, and then launched into rapid speech, half English and half Hindustani.

"Dear lady, you have said that I have come between him and his happiness. Why should I cause him any unhappiness? To-morrow you will be his wife, and his happiness will be complete. I shall rejoice at your wedding, for are you not already my sister? Now that you have saved me from divorce, my heart is light with joy. I should be a wretch, the daughter of a dog, if I did not rejoice in your happiness."

"Hush, Lalbee; you must not talk so. A man may have but one wife in my country, and I can never marry him."

"Ah, beloved sister, do not say so! You will break my heart! I beg you, I entreat you, to marry him. His whole happiness depends upon it, and his happiness is my happiness. Be his wife, his dearly-loved wife. I will renounce all my rights, and be even as though I were divorced. I will be as Noor-i-Chasm to him, and you shall be the mother of my



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of the slough of despair into which he had been flung, her words killed it. There was silence, except for the chatter of the mynas outside the fern-house, as they preened and plumed themselves in the golden sunshine of the morning. Lorina put her arm round Lalbee, and gently drew her towards the prince.

"Yacoob, won't you take her back?" she said.

But he shrank from the Mohammedan girl, with an aversion he did not attempt to hide.

"You have laid on me a burden greater than I can bear," he said, hoarsely.

The lawless blood of his ancestors boiled within his veins as he spoke. He gazed wildly at her, as though he would seize her in his arms, then and there, and carry her away to his castle, to defend, as his sweet possession, with his life, as his forefathers would have done before him.

"I cannot bear it; I will not live without you."

He advanced towards her, and laid a heavy hand upon her shoulder. She did not falter nor shrink for a moment under that nervous grasp. With a calm, steady gaze, she looked fearlessly into those wild, burning eyes. Swiftly they fell before hers, and the insane passion died as suddenly as it had arisen, leaving nothing but the broken-hearted man, bowed down in anguish before her.

"Good-bye, Yacoob; good-bye, dear friend. I will keep her whom you now reject. She shall be restored to you again when the trouble of the hour has passed."

She drew the trembling girl into her embrace. His grasp relaxed, as his wife again came between him and Lorina. He fell back, and seemed as though he would have spoken. But words failed him; he turned and left them; and a few minutes later Lorina heard the wheels of his cart roll swiftly away.



CHAPTER XIV

HIS HAPPINESS IS OURS

What is written by Allah on a man's forehead cannot be rubbed off.—*Proverb.*

MONDAY morning broke fine and glorious after another night's rain. Purple clouds lifted their golden heads above the horizon, promising a return of the welcome downpour later in the day. At the collector's house, the nine o'clock breakfast was over, and Mr Cunliffe sat in his private room occupied with documents that concerned his work.

Lorina issued from her room, and looked round. Not a servant was visible. She went to the boudoir, which opened into the fern-house, and a little sigh that was half a sob escaped her. It was a tribute to him who would ever maintain a place in her heart as a hero. He was gone from her life, gone beyond recall. His cup of happiness had been dashed from his lips at the last moment, for was not this to have been his wedding-day? His honest endeavours to break away from the yoke of custom, and to aspire to a higher standard of life, had been frustrated. She pitied him from the bottom of her heart. Pity is akin to love. Yet she did not love him—she was conscious of that fact now—or she would have held him blameless. He had erred, unwittingly, it is true; and, though she could make excuses for him, she could not forget the fact that the attainment of his desires would have been accomplished through the sacrifice of an innocent



woman. Now it only remained for her to depart, and place half-a-hemisphere between herself and him.

Yet this was not quite all that a sense of duty dictated. She owed something to the Begum in the way of explanation, and she must restore Lalbee to the harem. Although Lalbee had broken her gosha, the fact was known only to herself and the prince, and the trusty servant, the daughter of the old peon, who had waited on the English ladies. Neither Dowluth nor her mistress knew of Lalbee's visit to the prince's house, and no man but the prince himself had looked upon her face. It was therefore possible, if Mir Yacoob kept his counsel, to convey her back to the harem with all appearance of a strictly-preserved gosha. Nor was this all. Lorina cherished a secret hope of pleading Lalbee's cause with sufficient success to ensure her restitution to favour, and her salvation from unmerited divorce. Mrs Cunliffe's brougham drove up to the door. Lorina went to her room, where she found Lalbee crouched upon the floor.

"Come, little sister; the carriage waits. You must be as brave as you were when you sought the prince to save my life."

"But my gosha! What will they say in the harem?"

"They will never know that you have broken it."

Lalbee rose to her feet. She was completely enveloped in the slave's cloth, which hid every trace of her white muslin dress. The folds of the cloth were thrown over face as well.

"Now, come. The servants have been sent away, although they know nothing, and still believe you to be one of the Begum's ayahs."

It required a little gentle force, as well as persuasion, to make the trembling girl issue forth from her retreat.

Hurrying along the empty passages, they reached the verandah. Even Mrs Cunliffe was nowhere to be seen. The syce stood at the horse's head, and only caught a passing glimpse of the veiled figure. There was nothing surprising in the lady having an attendant from the harem who wished to preserve her gosha. They were a proud lot, those women of the Begum's household, and held themselves high. Even the servants, apparently, kept their gosha.

Lorina closed the carriage-door quickly, bidding the coachman drive on. As they passed along the road, she remembered her first drive, and the useless endeavours she had made to break away from the rules of the harem. There were happier hours spent in the saddle, when she and Mir Yacoob had ridden under the banyan trees, and had talked of all they would do in that wonderful city of Hyderabad, which now could never be her home. The brougham stopped. There was the well-known call to the guard to open, and Lorina, in the midst of sad memories, found herself before the familiar, iron-bound door of the harem. She entered, her attendant following close at her heels, and went straight to the sitting-room, where Mrs Russel was trying, without much success, to give her attention to a book. That lady, although not of a demonstrative nature, greeted her with tears of joy.

"Oh, my dear! I am so glad to see you!" She kissed her again, and scrutinised her anxiously. "Are you sure that you are none the worse for the—the——"

"None at all! I am perfectly well, thank you."

Tone and voice reassured her.

"And the wedding will be celebrated to-day. I have everything ready. Your dress is laid out on your bed: the veil, and orange-blossom, and white shoes, and——"



Lorina stopped her with a gesture, and said:

"The wedding is put off."

The solemnity of her tone startled the elder lady.

"Put off!" she echoed.

"Yes; it will not take place at all."

"And why?"

"Because Mir Yacoob already has a wife, and here she is."

She drew her companion forward, and moved the cloth from her face.

"Lalbee!"

Mrs Russel breathed her name as though she were face to face with one from the dead, staring at her in silent astonishment.

"I must see the Begum at once, and ask you to come with me to interpret what I have to say, for there must be no misunderstanding as to my relations with her son."

A servant was summoned, and a message was sent to the Begum begging that the English lady might be allowed an interview. Whilst they waited, Lorina relieved Lalbee of her disguise. She noted the marked change that came over Lalbee the moment the door of the harem closed her safely within the walls. The cloud of fearfulness vanished, and though not free from anxiety—for there was still the Begum to see—the pretty young matron was herself once more, smiling, like a happy child, in her gladness to be home again.

"Is the luggage ready?" asked Lorina. "I am sorry that the burden of the packing has fallen upon you."

"I was thankful to have something to do to take my thoughts off your terrible adventure. Yes; the luggage is ready, and the carts are expected at four o'clock."

"And yours?"

"It is also ready. I am to leave by to-night's mail for Bombay according to our previous arrangements."

She looked at Lorina, as though there might be some doubt about her own movements now that the wedding was put off.

"We will leave together, and you shall take me back to England as you brought me out."

Ten minutes later Lorina entered the Begum's room. She had never been there before. Its Oriental luxury and splendour accorded ill with the haggard face of its occupant. The Begum had risen from her cushions, and stood on a rich crimson rug not far from the entrance. Lorina advanced without waiting for welcome or greeting.

"Beebee," she said, using the familiar term of the harem, "I have come to say farewell. I am returning to England to-night, and you will never see me again."

The Begum listened, and the sorrowful dark eyes slowly filled with tears. There was a perceptible pause, a stillness before the breaking of the storm, and speech came in a tropical torrent.

"Lady, your words kill me. I know that we have outraged every rule of hospitality. Yet, believe me, it was not my will; it was not my doing. I was ignorant of the evil designs on your life. She who wronged you is in punishment. I pray for your forgiveness. Nay, more, I pray that you will stay with us. I grant the shahdee, and you shall be as my own daughter. Ah! do not take my boy, my only son, from me. If you go to England, he will follow, and I shall never look upon him again."

The sharp note of pain that rang through her words stabbed Lorina to the heart.



"Dear Beebee," she said, gently, and full of pity, "believe me, he will not follow me to England."

The Begum gazed at her incredulously.

"You do not know him; he is like his father. Drawn swords will not keep him from his love. Besides, you are his wife in the eyes of your English law, and he will claim you. He has often threatened to leave me, in my obstinacy, and to make a home in your land. He will follow you assuredly. Ay, and you may find him there before you, for he has already departed, and I shall never see him again."

"Indeed, you mistake. I am not his wife in the eyes of my law, and I can never marry him here. Yesterday I told him that we must part. It is against our English law for a man to marry again whilst he still has a wife. Your son's wife is here. Lalbee," she called, "come here."

In obedience to the summons, a figure with bowed head timidly approached and fell on her knees before the Begum, kissing her feet. For some seconds there was silence, then the Begum spoke gravely, almost sternly:

"Daughter, where have you been? Have you come back from the grave?"

Lalbee's reply was a sob. Lorina hastened to give an explanation.

"She has been safe in my keeping. She saw me go down the well, and was afraid, for she knew what Dowluth had done. She hid in my room——" Lorina paused. The Begum asked no questions, and she did not think it necessary to explain further. "And now I restore her to you, and beg that you will restore her to her husband."

"But he is gone! They tell me that he returned to his house yesterday like a madman, and departed

last night by the mail. Lady, have mercy on a miserable woman, a widow, a broken-hearted mother. Stay with us, and prevent him from crossing the sea."

"He will not cross the sea. He has gone to Hyderabad, not to England. He knows now that I cannot, that I will not, be his wife."

"But you are his wife," said the Begum again.

She found it difficult to understand the new situation. The invalidity of a marriage which had been properly performed was incomprehensible to her. A marriage, according to her teaching, was a marriage binding the woman fast whether there was a previous wife or not.

"No; I am not his wife. The marriage in England was nothing, since he already had a wife. And why should he want another when he has such an one as Lalbee? Rise, little sister," she said to the girl, who still crouched before the Begum. "Let me give you back to your mother."

The grief-stricken face of the Mohammedan lady softened as her eyes rested on her daughter-in-law, and Lalbee found courage to speak.

"Mother, do not be angry that I hid myself. And oh! entreat her to stay with us. His heart will break, and he will die, if she forsakes him. There is room for us both in your heart and in his."

She wound her arm in that of the elder lady, and laid her head on her breast. The Begum was deeply moved, and her voice trembled and faltered as she pleaded for her son.

"Lady, is it that you cannot pardon? Can you not forgive for the sake of him who loves you so? Oh! stay with us, have pity on him, his happiness is ours. It is as my daughter here says: his heart will break, and with his ours will surely break too!"

She held out her hand to the infidel woman—she



who had been so proud and bitter against her son's choice. She would even have gone upon her knees to pray for the boon which was impossible for the English lady to grant. Lorina caught the extended hand, and held it for a moment in her firm grip.

"Beebee, you ask what is impossible. It cannot be. Forget that I live, and win him back to her who has a right to his love. Be patient, and God will yet be good to you and your son."

As she turned and left the room, the Begum folded Lalbee in her arms. Her tears mingled with her daughter's, and words fell brokenly from her lips:

"Allah keep him in this his darkest hour! What is written on a man's forehead cannot be rubbed off."



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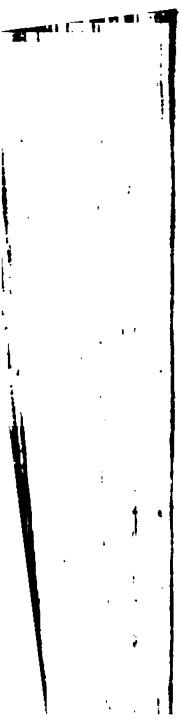
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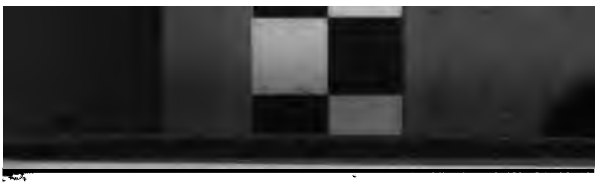
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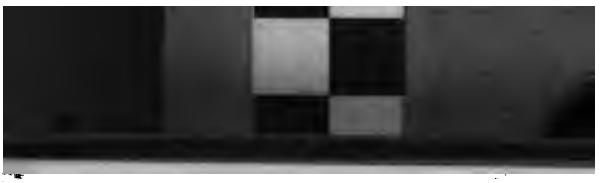
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